

The Golden Path

A Myanmar Guide
for Dhamma Seekers



Part 1:
Planning & Logistics

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The Golden Path

Shwe Lan Ga Lay

(ရွှေလမ်းကလေး)

A Myanmar Guidebook for Dhamma Seekers

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PART 1: PLANNING & LOGISTICS
.....

By Joah McGee



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- **Carl Stimson** (American, resides in Japan)
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“May we all find the highest truth in the precious Dhamma well preserved in the Golden Land.”

- **Snow Aye/Phyu Wint Yee** (Burmese, resides in Myanmar), Sites Reviewer, Researcher, Interpreter, www.compassionatehands-myanmar.org, www.compassionatetravelsmyanmar.com
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- **Kathryn Tomasetti** (American/Italian journalist, travels the globe), Design Organizer, www.rutherfordtomasettipartners.com
- **Rochelle Tosland** (Western Australia), Copyeditor and Researcher
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ARTISTS

The following artists donated their artistic skills, time, and energy to illustrate inspiring images to accompany the words found within *Shwe Lan Ga Lay*. They meticulously drew and refined drafts, working from a combination of text, description, imagination, personal experience, photographs, and video. Thanks to their selfless work, the words of *Shwe Lan* are brought to life with their captivating designs, allowing the reader to not only read but to *feel* the depth of the Burmese Dhamma. Note that just a fraction of their completed artwork appears in *Part I*—only those illustrations that correspond to these four chapters. In other words, so much more of this wonderful artwork is to come!



- Aleksei Gomez Torres (<http://alekseigomes.blogspot.com>, aleksei.bambues@gmail.com)
- Alicia Concha Larrauri
- Alma Lucía Martínez Salazar
- Ana Mouga
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- John Henebry (www.thehenebrys.com)
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- Tri Gong Residence, Chiang Mai (<http://www.trigong.com/>)
- Aloha House, Bangkok (search “Aloha House” under www.surfrental.net, www.vacationrental.com, or www.homeaway.com or call +19493103622)
- Golden City Hotel, Yangon (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Golden-City-Hotel/314378141930410>)

- Royal City Guesthouse, Mandalay
- Kan Oo Monastery, Taunggyi
- Shwe Oo Min Monastery, Yangon
- Prekhemma Monastery, Sagaing Hills
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- Family of Snow Aye
- Family of Ma Khaing
- Family of Dr. Ko Thant Zin Oo



FOREWORD

Shwe Lan Ga Lay's intended audience is very simple: those seeking liberation from suffering through the Buddha's teachings. Our goal is to humbly assist readers in deepening their practice in Myanmar, the country where we believe the Buddha's teachings have been best preserved. *Shwe Lan* does **not** aspire or pretend to be an instruction manual for practice or a textbook on Buddhist scriptures. Rather, it is a guide to point you in the direction of Myanmar's many great meditation masters, monks filled with wisdom, and nuns who daily live out the Buddha's teachings.

Shwe Lan Ga Lay has been a labor of love for all concerned from the get-go. **The vast majority of work on *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* has been done by volunteers, who have received no remuneration of any kind for this project.** Additionally, all financial dana goes strictly towards covering the basic costs of the project, and sales revenue is split between project costs as well as to further support Pariyatti's mission.

The only thing *Shwe Lan* asks in return is this: at the time of undertaking any meritorious action—from meditating to offering *dāna* to cleaning a monastery toilet—we will be very happy if you have the volition to share your merit with the book's contributors (and happier still if we hear from you in the process).

For those who find benefit from this *Part I* early release, and would like to help us continue the work, there are two ways you can do so. First, you can join *Shwe Lan* as a volunteer by sending an email at burmadhamma@gmail.com. There is always work to do, and many types of skills are needed. In particular, we can use help in the following areas: artists, layout editors, map-making, photographers, copy-editors, scholars, web designers, translators, public relations,



publishing, writers, researchers, and general volunteers are always welcome. The second way support can be shown is through financial *dāna* for the project, which can be offered through Pariyatti's website.

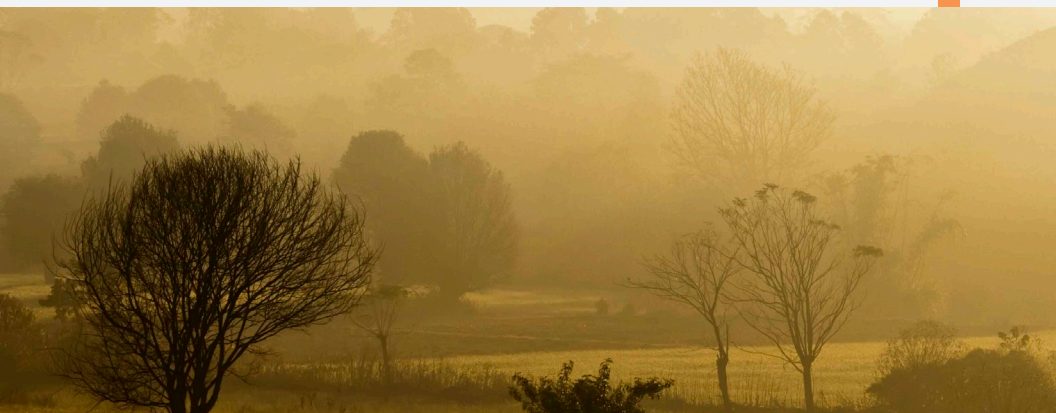
Finally, if you have already been to Myanmar, or plan to go, and are willing to help us during (or after) your trip, please let the editorial staff know! There are always “on-the-ground tasks” that need doing. Additionally, if you come across information not included in this edition, do inform us. We are constantly on the lookout to update our content, and what we have now was provided by meditators/visitors just like you.

Many pairs of eyes—Burmese and non-Burmese alike—have passed over these pages. While greatly lengthening the creative process and *Shwe Lan*'s timeline, the goal was to ensure that *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* be as accurate and respectful a portrayal of Burmese Buddhist practices and traditions, as well as Burmese culture, as possible. If at any point we have failed to maintain this perspective, we would like to apologize for those lapses, and also for any information that is (inadvertently) inaccurate or misleading.

More information can be found at the blog www.burmadhamma.blogspot.com. Eventually the book's content will also appear online at www.burmesedhamma.com.

NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION

As noted in *Shwe Lan Ga Lay*, there is no standardized system for a Romanized transliteration of the beautiful Burmese language. This poses a great challenge to any author trying to render it into a foreign script. *Shwe Lan* is in the process of constructing a sound, practical and easy-to-follow transcription system. Some kinks still need to be worked out, a process that is sort of like laying the tracks while driving the train. Of course, these chapters of *Shwe Lan* contain many words that have been transcribed from Burmese and there is a system in use; however, the entire system is not completely ready for this early release of chapters. It should be ready for publication along with the next set of chapters. We ask readers' patience in the meantime as it is worked to completion.



INTRODUCTION

ALL BECAUSE OF A SCANNER...

Shwe Lan Ga Lay: Part I is being released in mid-April of 2015, two years and two weeks after the project was begun. And it all started, innocently enough, from a few scanned photos...

It was winter 2012, and I was with my Dhamma friends, Snow Aye and Bhikkhu Agga, at Webu Monastery in Ingyinbin, a very small village north of Mandalay. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this remote monastery had for some reason been offered a brand new scanner. We decided to interrupt the time allocated for our meditation practice by scanning the monastery's photo archive of the Arahant Webu Sayadaw, thinking that in this way, these priceless photographs could be preserved for posterity. Not leaving well enough alone, however, we thought, "Even better than simply sharing these photos as boring .jpgs, why not make a kind of slideshow with them? And if we're going to make a slideshow out of them, why not add a few video clips, some Buddhist chanting, a few Webu Sayadaw quotes, some previously recorded interviews and Dhamma discourses, some traditional Burmese music, a bit of background information, and even a few hastily-conducted interviews (recorded from the built-in camera of a MacBook Air)?!"

Six weeks later, never with Internet connectivity, and moving from Ingyinbin to (literally) a cave in the Sagaing Hills, Bhikkhu Agga and I completed a kind of amateur-documentary.¹ It sat on my Mac desktop for half a year before I decided to post it to YouTube;

¹ This is now called *Webu Sayadaw: Anthology of a Noble One* and is available freely on YouTube.

there was no great announcement—I simply shared the link with a few friends. Some months later, I received an email from Pariyatti. At first fearing that I had inadvertently violated some copyright law, something else entirely was the point of this initial call...and among other things, the idea for *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* was hatched.

Perhaps I should back up a bit. A few years earlier, in 2008,¹ I had written a very informal 30-page “guide” that covered what I had learned about Burmese culture, monasteries, and other sites. Backing up even further, I had left my job of more than three years in Japan in order to devote myself to the work of Vipassanā practice, spending much time around Kyoto before moving on to Thailand. This was when I began to hear about the Golden Land, and in 2003 I flew from Bangkok to Yangon with Jarrod, a New Zealander who soon after ordained.

As for me, I wanted to visit the sites related to my meditation tradition’s lineage. But I had no idea where to find this information, let alone how to manage the logistics of getting around what was a very foreign country to me. All I had to rely on was a rambling email message that had been forwarded over a dozen times between foreign meditators with a similar volition, and I used it as best I could to plan my own trip. Thus, my main intention for making this 2008 guide was to better organize the information so that fellow meditators could reach these sites more easily than I had been able to. And I can readily confess now, while at the time it represented the culmination of my knowledge and experience, that today I can barely read a line from it without cringing.² Interestingly, although I only shared this with a few friends at the time (as with the Webu Sayadaw documentary that would come later), to my utter surprise, I scarcely met a meditator in Myanmar who arrived without these printed notes in hand in the years that followed.

In the intervening years I was asked by several meditator and monastic friends to update this document for a third time, and in late

1 This document was later revised in 2009 with the help of Josh Bowie, Carl Stimson, Ko Kyaw Ngwe, Gair Crutcher, Snow Aye, and Chaya Kudla. The revised version was put on Pariyatti’s website.

2 I should also add that while my greatest resource was this “rambling email,” last year I was shown a kind of “meditator’s guide” that predated even this! Looking to be from around 1990, it was a mix-match of small notepad paper photocopied together and then passed along, featuring various information about key sites and regions. This only underscores how difficult—and yet how precious—this information has been to us foreign meditators. Those many-copied notes are the direct antecedent to this present work of *Shwe Lan*.

2012, finally agreed to take this on. Circling back to an earlier point in this narrative, a few months later—in February of 2013—I got that message from Pariyatti, when they so generously offered to support my intention. With great joy and enthusiasm for this unexpected backing, I decided to formally start the project in April 2013. As this was the height of the torrid Burmese summer, I made plans to work from a Taunggyi monastery, located in the hilly regions and temperate climates of Shan State. I confidently estimated that I could finish the entire project within a few months, and had a mental image that my time in Taunggyi would be spent doing some research, enjoying the local teashops, continuing meditation practice, and leisurely writing. The depths of my delusion would soon be revealed.

THE PROJECT EXPANDS



Far from the relaxed, casual flow of work I had initially envisioned, interspersed with tea, the project has been all-consuming, with time taken off only for meditation practice and illness...and sometimes not even then! But thanks to the Dhamma, in the intervening two years and two weeks (as the *Acknowledgements* page illustrates), literally hundreds of volunteers from around the world have joined in this vision. They have contributed selflessly to raise the quality of this work to exponential dimensions. Professional photographers have donated their entire collections for our use; artists have drawn specific scenes, sites, and maps; noted historians and scholars have patiently read over many drafts and left their entire writings at our disposal; monks and

nuns have sat for interviews—some lasting hours, others lasting days; editors have combed through these chapters an inestimable number of times; designers have carefully laid out all of the information in a dynamic and visually appealing way for the reader; researchers have undertaken arduous treks and visited hundreds of sites while accumulating dozens of pages of research and hundreds of photos, and countless other individuals have been involved in more ways than it is possible to list here.

Throughout this process I have frequently reflected on how the nature of *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* has mirrored the archetypical Burmese monastery that is described in these pages. At a village monastery, everyone gives according to his or her volition, skills, and availability. However, no matter what or how much is given, what is important is that the giving remains selfless and pure. This *dāna* happens in all kinds of diverse and creative ways—from offering a single spoonful of rice, to cooking and cleaning for hundreds; from giving daily Dhamma sermons to offering monks' robes during a festival; and from sponsoring a large novitiation ceremony to buying a few needed toiletries for a monastery. All of these tasks allow the monastery to fulfill its function in the community, and—if the tasks were done with the pure intention of selfless service—they allow the donors to enjoy the unequalled sense of joy, satisfaction, and contentment that always arise with the generous mind.

So also, at *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* our volunteers range from those who offered a single photo or story from their trip to the Golden Land, to those who took on an entire section or task and saw it through to its completion, to those who have worked tirelessly for over two years and at so many tasks it may be hard for them even to recall all that they've done. And like the village monastery, the consistent thread connecting all of these efforts is the selfless dedication to the quality of this noble endeavor. And finally, like monastery volunteers, each contributor to *Shwe Lan* is sustained by the joy they will feel if even a single meditator-reader will benefit.

The journey our team has taken has been truly incredible, and may merit its own book some day! Volunteers pushed their creative energies to the limit, and successfully took on multiple challenges, succeeding with exceptional results. Meanwhile, the truth of *anicca* has marched inexorably on in all of our lives, sometimes in surprising ways: during this time, some volunteers formalized their commitment to a Dhamma partner for life by getting married, while others

formalized a commitment to Dhamma for life by becoming ordained. Some have turned down professional opportunities to ensure that they would continue to have time available for *Shwe Lan*, while others have moved across countries and continents. Some have borne children and brought new life into this world. And one greatly inspiring figure, for whom all *Shwe Lan* readers should be grateful, has passed away. We thank Ko Kyaw Ngwe, for all he gave to so many of us. His work, begun so many years ago, continues to live on in these pages.

THE ROAD AHEAD



Shwe Lan has mushroomed into a very large book. Rather than wait until the entire book is completed, our team has decided to issue regular installments. *Shwe Lan*'s **Table of Contents** is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | 8. Monasteries |
| 2. Planning Your Trip | 9. Yangon |
| 3. Health | 10. Around Yangon |
| 4. You've Landed | 11. Mandalay |
| 5. Food | 12. Around Mandalay |
| 6. Burmese Days | 13. Sagaing and Mingun |
| 7. Monastic Life | 14. Shan State |

You may notice that Chapters 9-14 include regional sites. There, we share information about hundreds of monasteries and pagodas where meditators can pay their respects, offer *dāna*, pursue meditation

or study. Enormous research has gone into these chapters, unearthing much information that may never have been shared in English before, and some information that may never have been written in any language. The final, finished version will include an Appendix of useful information and key phrases.

Though only four chapters are being released now, drafts of the ten remaining chapters have been completed, and are currently in varying stages of revision. Until the entire book is published, it has become a special kind of torture to amass such a unique and special collection of fascinating facts and inspiring histories, and yet not be able to share these in full outside of our team! But the final result will be spectacular and quite unique, and well worth the wait. It is our hope that future editions can expand to focus on such regions as Bagan, Mon State, Rakhine State, Karen State, and Bago, among others. As noted in the Foreword, we welcome contributions from any reader who would like to assist in our effort.

A WORD ON SOURCES



Shwe Lan Ga Lay is not a book meant for scholars, academics, or professors. As stated in the Foreword, it is a guide for Dhamma practitioners who are experientially engaging in Burmese Buddhist teachings, practice, and study in Myanmar. That said, we also believe that knowledge is power, and the greater access to information that our meditator-readers can have, the more it can inform and inspire this direct engagement. We do not attempt to tell our readers how to behave, what to believe, or what form of practice to follow, but

rather we assume a mature readership who can assess and integrate—or even ignore—the information provided based on their individual interests, lineage, and needs. With this in mind, we have done our best to provide accurate and accessible information, while also leaving this material at the doorstep of each reader to decide how to understand or apply it. Although *Shwe Lan* does deliver readers with a wealth of information from a wide variety of (and in some cases, unique) sources, because the intent is primarily to guide and inform yogis in a practical way, readers will not find heavily cited references as may be found in academic texts.

Additionally, some Burmese sources have proven difficult to properly cite. Some Dhamma books are not published for commercial intent, and dissemination of these books are not primarily concerned with protecting—and monetizing—intellectual property. Indeed, some texts referenced in writing *Shwe Lan* are more like pamphlets that only contain a few recorded discourses of a particular Sayadaw. It is unrealistic to expect publications like these to have detailed title pages with all the usual information that is used in making a bibliography. In some cases different printings of the same text even carry different titles. And if the material is translated into English, information on the title, copyright holder, etc. can become even more confusing. Thus, while we have done our best to cite specific authors, titles, and dates of publication, a small number of gaps may be found.

As with all aspects of the book, if any reader has cause to question the accuracy of any of *Shwe Lan*'s content, we invite their feedback to improve future editions.

FINAL WORDS

May this work assist in your most noble efforts to practice the Dhamma in the Golden Land. May you reach your highest aspirations. It is our deepest privilege to assist you in this most honorable undertaking of following the Noble Eight Fold Path on your journey within the Golden Land.

Joah McGee
April 2015
Colorado, USA



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CHAPTER 2

PLANNING YOUR TRIP



“...for my own part, I had deliberately refrained from reading any books on the subject, as it was my aim to receive without preconceived ideas the most vivid impression possible of a country which I knew to be at once rich in physical beauties, adorned by many monuments of extreme antiquity and interest, and inhabited by a people admitted by general consent to be both picturesque and lovable. I, at any rate, was on a voyage of discovery, frankly acknowledging my ignorance, but full of anticipations of pleasurable surprises in store, and looking forward to my work in its towns and jungles, rivers and temples, with an eagerness hardly tempered by the apprehension of snakes and malaria which many smoke-room ‘yarns’ told on the voyage might well have engendered.”

—Robert Talbot Kelly, *Burma: The Land and the People*, Volume 17 (1910)

The Buddha on the “Planning Mind”

As one begins the initial planning for one’s trip to Myanmar, it may be helpful to contemplate some of the Buddha’s words on how to plan for the future while firmly staying in the present. The following verse is translated from the Pāli Tipitaka (Majjhimanikāya, Uparipannāsapāli, Vibhaṅgavaggo, Ānandabhaddekarattasuttaṃ) by Klaus Nothnagel:

*“One should not linger on the past
nor yearn for what is yet to come.
The past is left behind, the future out of reach.
But in the present he observes with insight each phenomenon,
Immovable, unshakable. Let the wise practice this.*

And how friend, does one hanker for the future? One keeps relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such physical appearance in the future.’ One keeps relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of sensation in the future’. One keeps relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of perception in the future’. One keeps relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of mental conditioning in the future’. One keeps relishing the thought: ‘May I

have such and such kind of consciousness in the future’. This is the way, friend, one hankers for the future.

And how friend, does one not hanker for the future? One does not keep relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such physical appearance in the future. One does not keep relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of sensation in the future’. One does not keep relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of perception in the future’. One does not keep relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of mental conditioning in the future. One does not keep relishing the thought: ‘May I have such and such kind of consciousness in the future’. This is the way, friend, one does not hanker for the future.”

The Buddha used the Pāli phrase, *anāgatamatthaṃ cintetum* for “future planning.” The idea is that one should think of the future through the prism of one’s present actions. Whatever one does now, that will bring some result in the future. Thus, one should do good deeds now, so that one’s future may be bright.

And one could hardly plan anything more wonderful than a trip to the Golden Land, where Dhamma is such an integral part of people’s lives. And one could hardly make a more wholesome plan for a trip to the Golden Land than to go there to practice meditation, organize a pilgrimage or stay for an extended period at a monastery. This chapter takes on the more mundane issues of planning, as you prepare for your trip to Myanmar.

Remembrance of Things Past

The modernization of Myanmar is producing rapid changes across the economic, cultural, social and political spectrum. Some meditators may wish to hold onto a vision of “the good old days” of the Golden Land—romanticized, analog memories of an increasingly digitalized country. But as U Sway Tin reminds us in his *Biography of Mogok Sayadaw*, “If you have fond memories that you wish to cherish about any place... the fresh evidence of Buddhist awareness of impermanence would surely wipe off old memories with stark reality of the present.”



PLANNING YOUR TRIP

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INTRO

“Burma, I declare! One does not hear much of that part of the world; it’s always connected in my mind with rice and rain.”

—B. M. Croker, *The Road to Mandalay* (1917)

These words were spoken by a fictional British character upon learning that her friend had decided to travel to Rangoon. Though written almost one hundred years ago, travelers to the Golden Land today often face a similar reaction from their friends and family, some of whom may confuse Burma with Burundi or Bhutan¹—and even if it’s referred to as Myanmar, have no idea where it could possibly be! However, since the time that the venerable Ledi Sayadaw began corresponding with some of the top Western thinkers about Buddhist theory, and British chemist Allan Bennett became the first foreigner to take robes in the country over a century ago, a steady trickle of foreigners have kept Burma in their minds and hearts as they worked towards the liberating peace of *nibbāna*.

From the period between the colonial British occupation and the fight against Japan in World War II, and from the Cold War Era to contemporary times, the country has for the most part been overlooked by the greater world other than as a means to some other geopolitical end. Neighboring countries always seemed to have bigger crises, greater global relevance, and attract more scholars and dissertations. But this may all be quickly changing. A country once forgotten in time by all but a few is now receiving regular visits by top world diplomats, celebrities, billionaires, and investors. And its tourist numbers are off the charts, as Daniel Isaac Combs acknowledges even back in 2012 in *Sorcerers and Cigarettes: Falling Off The Map In Burma*: “The numbers [of tourists] are still climbing. In the Lonely Planet based economy, places are changing.”

Modern Myanmar, Burma’s official name in English since 1989, is going through a period of rapid cultural, political, and economic change. While this book will be helpful for anyone interested in Myanmar’s culture, especially its rich Buddhist history, *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* is written especially for foreign travelers interested in visiting the country

1 Confusing Burma’s geographical location apparently isn’t a new phenomenon. In 1913, Sir Herbert Thirkell White wrote in *A Civil Servant in Burma*: “Even what was long regarded as the mythical confusion of Burma with Bermuda was seriously printed in a London weekly last year.”

for its meditative practices. Our intent is to support seekers in their exploration of age-old Buddhist traditions, even—and especially—in the context of a rapidly-approaching modernity. What changes can this generation of beneficiaries of Ledi Sayadaw’s works—yogis, meditators, Dhamma students, and Buddhists—expect to find in particular? What do these changes mean for those who wish to follow the example set by Allan Bennett’s ordination? And how will the country’s greater openness and access to opportunity affect its deeply held traditions and customs?

The way forward is still not completely clear, as this chapter goes on to illustrate. But perhaps the words of Harold Fielding, a “pundit” who was present during a similar period of rapid transition, are worth considering. Following England’s annexation of Upper Burma in 1885, British troops deposed the Burmese king and sent him into exile, moved the capital 693 miles south, and opened new ports that would go on to bring both international trade and attract new immigrant populations. Traditional industries were revitalized and new ones created, infrastructure—much of it still standing today—was developed, new urban centers were created, and overwhelming changes came to the fields of technology, food, weaponry, and transportation. Ten years into this transformation, Fielding tried to look into the future, questioning how local values and traditions would be affected by such unprecedented change. He came to this conclusion: “But a community that has lived through twenty-four centuries of change, and is now of the strength and vitality that the Buddhist monkhood is, can have nothing to fear from any such change.... the pattern and example of purity and righteousness will always remain.”

While the early twenty-first century experiment has yet to play out, we can evaluate how this late nineteenth century experience ended up. Fielding was writing in an era when local Buddhists believed they were approaching “The End of Times.” The country was faced with not just political, cultural, and military crises, but also an existential crisis that threatened a total disappearance of the Buddhist faith, or an “extinction” of the religion in the words of the Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka. This was not paranoia, as large tracts of Lower Burma saw a shocking decline in traditional practices as the colonial government took hold. Scores of monks fled for the Mandalay region in the face of increasing British and Indian immigration, leaving many towns entirely devoid of monasteries, and Bamar residents becoming a minority community.

But U Janaka (who himself lived during the postwar years, another period of advancing modernity) offers a quite different perspective on

Burmese history. In *Autobiography*, he writes: “You would say that we are very much out of date. I would say ‘no.’ Our attitude is to escape the miseries of life. That alone is very much in advance of the common way of thinking. Both in thinking and action we are well in advance of time. We are about 2,000 years ahead of all people.”

In fact, not long after Fielding made his observations, just a couple of decades after concerns were being expressed that the Buddhist religion in Burma might not survive, the country would go on to produce such luminaries as Sun Lun Sayadaw, Webu Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, Saya Thet Gyi, among many others, while also launching several major meditation traditions that have since spread round the world, literally changing the course of human history. As a result of those developments in Burmese Buddhism, lay people today, on every continent, are able to practice Dhamma as never before, as many of the readers of this book can attest. Outside interest in the practice continues to grow as meditators and Buddhists stream into Myanmar in ever increasing numbers.

But back to the present moment, when you have apparently decided to come to Myanmar and partake of its Buddha Dhamma and traditions yourself. This chapter explains some of the mundane nitty-gritty you may need to help yourself plan.





Burmese Traditional Ways

ရှေးထုံးလည်း မပယ်နှင့်၊ ဈေးသုံးလည်း မလွယ်နှင့်၊ ရှေးထုံးပယ်လျှင်
လွှဲတတ်သည် ။ဈေးသုံးလွယ်လျှင် မွဲတတ်သည်။

ၚဲး: ̣hou~: lē: mə pē hne~, zhē: tou~: lē: mə lwē hne~, ̣ē: ̣hou~:
pē hlye~ lwē ̣a. tī, zhē: tou~: lwē hlye~ mwē ̣a. tī

Don't give up your tradition.

When at the market, don't spend easily.

If you give up your tradition, you will go wrong.

And if you spend your money too easily, you will go poor.

Health Insurance

Many travelers choose to purchase health insurance for their travels in Myanmar. Given the large number of agencies and policies out there, it would not be practical to list them all here. Internet searches, and asking people with travel experience about the plans they have used, are good ways to start shopping for travel health insurance. One's current health insurance may also include travel benefits. If one decides to purchase a plan, make sure to keep the health insurance card close at hand so it is available for any unexpected clinic visits. When buying health insurance for a trip to Myanmar, consider a plan including airlift evacuation, as some emergency procedures can only be performed in Thailand or Singapore.

In the end, though, the best form of insurance is taking precautions, and for more on this topic, see the **Health chapter**.

TRAVEL TO MYANMAR

“Yangon is only an hour away from Bangkok by air. It is, I discovered, an hour that takes you into a very different world.”

—Patrick Forsyth, *Beguiling Burma*

လာချင် အနီးလည်း၊ မလာချင် ခရီးဝေး။

lā che~ anī: lē:, mā lā che~ kha yī: wē:

“If one wishes to visit, the distance seems nearer.

If not, it seems further.”



Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Mrs. Pat Nixon in Burmese dress at the President's Residence in Rangoon, (November 1953)

Patricia Elliott notes that the American Vice President and his wife visited Rangoon on March 17th, 1952. She describes the scene in *The White Umbrella*: “The Nixons were an appealing couple. To everyone’s delight, they appeared on the lawn of the President’s House in Burmese dress.”

During the British era, Rangoon (now Yangon) was easily visited via steamer and an important destination of many global shipping and transit routes. When air travel first arrived in this part of the world, the city became a gateway for greater Southeast Asia. It was something of a must-see stopover for diplomats, dignitaries, and other celebrities, including Vice President Richard Nixon in 1952. Travelers coming to Asia from the US, England, or Australia had to fly into Rangoon, and transfer from there. But as Burma’s borders began to close after 1962, it became increasingly challenging to get to Rangoon under any circumstances. The number of flights decreased, some airlines discontinued service, and many airports stopped offering direct routes. It reached the point that by the 1990s, articles about the country would often begin with the writer breathlessly—and probably a little overdramatically—describing the suddenly tense atmosphere in the cabin as the plane landed. While authors would use this kind of

introduction to punch up the relative mystery and political instability of the country, it also reflected the truth that for many years and due to various boycotts and sanctions, Burma was far from a popular destination. Now that the country has begun to open up again, it is becoming easier to travel to, and travel in, Burma/Myanmar.

For a time, a flight from Bangkok was the only reliable connection. Even today it is still the most common connecting point in the region, although now one can come to Myanmar via Malaysia, China, India, Singapore, Japan, and Korea. Myanmar now has three airports besides Yangon now welcoming international flights, with additional regional airports planning connecting flights.

Thai Air is recommended as a good option for monks, as they are reportedly helpful in assisting monks and may have a cursory understanding of Vinaya.¹ **MAI** (Myanmar Airways International) is another reliable and slightly cheaper airline. Budget airlines like **Air Asia** and **Bangkok Air** are popular because of their inexpensive tickets: one-way is often less than \$100 to nearby cities. To compare various routes and airline possibilities, one can search on www.skyscanner.com or check in with **local travel agencies**.

Note that travel insurance is highly recommended. One's local travel agent or insurance company will have information, or one can consult websites such as World Nomads, Blue Cross, MNUI, or Travel Underwriters.

A Traveler's Metta

"When we are travelling on a train, on a plane or by car, we should develop mettā. We should wish all the people on the plane happiness and peace. Developing mettā in this way is very good. Whenever we meet, see, or hear any living beings, we should develop mettā." Sayadaw U Indaka of Chan Myay Myaing, *Metta: The Practice of Loving-Kindness As the Foundation for Insight Meditation Practice*.

Cultural Sensitivity with Humor

For an amusing look at cultural customs with accompanying color pictures, you can download the free PDF book for foreign travelers known as *Dos And Don'ts for Tourists* at www.dosanddentsfortourists.com

¹ What is more definite are the proposed Chinese plans to connect their cities with ports along the Indian Ocean via high speed rail, including in Myanmar.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Until only very recently, it had not been possible for Westerners to enter the country through most land border crossings. And even at those border crossings where non-local travelers had been permitted to cross into Myanmar, it was *only* to that border town, and for a limited time of just several days. Backpackers in Thailand made use of the Thai-Myanmar crossings primarily to get a Thai visa extension.

As this book is going to print, official policy about these crossings is not carved in stone, so travelers are advised to look for the most up-to-date information prior to their trip. □ But according to information presently available on the Myanmar government website (www.mip.gov.mm/482/) there are four Thai-Myanmar land border crossings open to foreigners since August 2013:

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. Tachilek – Maisai | b. Myawaddy – Mesok |
| c. Htee Kee – Phunaron | d. Kawthoung – Ranong |

However, note that Visa On Arrival for Myanmar is *not* yet available at these crossings. More specific details about various ports of entry into Myanmar is available on the above website.

TRAVEL TIPS ABOUT FLYING TO MYANMAR

For anyone not used to traveling abroad or flying in this day and age, it is highly recommended to do a bit of web research to find good deals, tips for flying long distances, airport regulations, etc. Here, we list a few things to keep in mind that are particularly Myanmar-related:

► Travel Dates

- Budget airlines flying into Myanmar, *Air Asia* especially, offer super saver deals if one purchases the ticket well in advance of one's travel date (sometimes as much as six to eight months earlier). By regularly checking their site in the months leading up to one's planned travel date, there's the chance of scoring an extremely discounted fare.
- Flying the middle of the week (Tuesday, Wednesday) is usually cheaper than on the weekend (Friday, Saturday). Finally, holiday periods usually mean more expensive fares, as well as during the high season, which for Myanmar means from around October through February.

► Plan Ahead

- Make a copy of one's passport picture page, plane tickets, hotel reservations, contact numbers, and meditation course confirmations.
- If traveling in a group, share these copies in case of emergency.
- Keep an additional electronic version of this information available on a computer, flash drive, and/or email account.

Fighting Jet Lag

For most yogis, it's a long, long way to Myanmar, so jet lag is a real issue to contend with. In particular, those unused to flying can be laid low for a couple of days of one's precious trip time by jet lag. Really bad jet lag can feel like getting hit over the head with a sledgehammer. Information about minimizing the effects of jet lag is available on the web. There are various anti-jet lag programs, many of which actually begin a couple days prior to one's flight. One program that comes highly recommended by yogis is *Overcoming Jet Lag*, by Dr. Charles Ehret and Lynne Waller Scanlon. It is a three-step program developed at Argonne National Laboratory for the U.S. Army Rapid Deployment Forces.

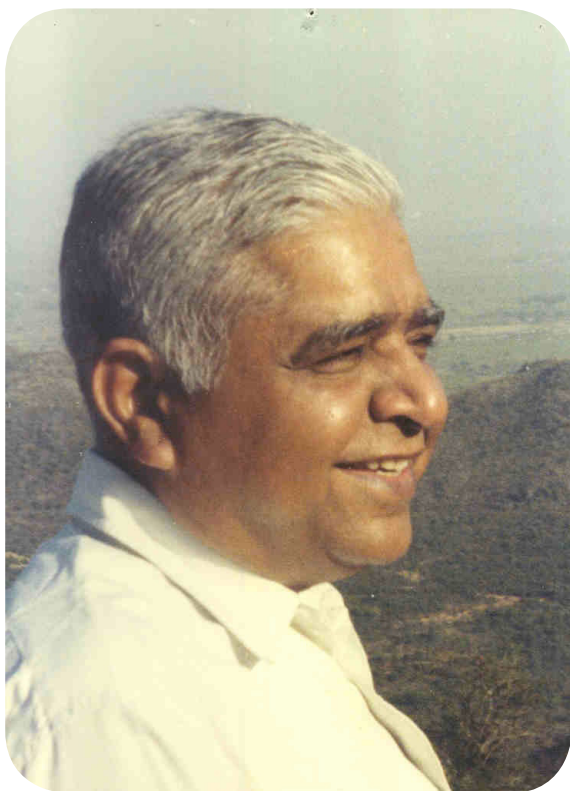
One traveler-savvy tip is to set your watch to the time of your destination (Yangon) as soon as you clear customs at your home airport, and follow meal times and rest/activity periods as if you were already in the new time zone. This will give your body and mind a jumpstart in getting acclimated to the new time.

Meditation While Traveling

"Besides the weekends, every time the college closed, I went back for a full course, and so I learnt how to enter into deep meditation. This stood me in good stead when I had to take air journeys. When taking off and when landing, I would go into deep meditation with a vow to wake up when the plane was safely airborne or when it landed. But it needs constant practice; without it, the ability fades away, as I have discovered to my dismay." Daw Mya Sein (1954), lecturer at Rangoon University and disciple of U Ba Khin

Customs at Yangon International Airport

Many Burmese can recount the famous story of when Sayagyi U Goenka¹ left Burma in 1969. At this time, he was leaving his country of birth in order to travel to India and teach his parents the precious Vipassana meditation that he had learned under Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Before clearing customs, an airport agent asked if he had anything to declare upon leaving, to which the future meditation teacher replied he was taking three precious Burmese gems. The agent became concerned and further security wandered over, and they asked U Goenka to elaborate. He said he was taking with him *sīla*, *samadhi*, and *panna* to share with people abroad, and upon hearing this the customs agent broke into a smile and let him pass.



1 As this is the way the very widely known meditation master, S.N. Goenka, is referred to in Myanmar, it is the title we use (along with the more simple “U Goenka”) throughout this book.

VISA INFORMATION



Passport Advice

- Well in advance of one's trip, check to be sure that one's passport is not set to expire any time soon. Most visa offices will hesitate to stamp a passport that has fewer than six months before its expiration date.
- Scan a color copy of one's passport picture page; save a copy electronically on a portable flash drive as well as on email for an emergency.
- Black and white paper copies of the picture page may be acceptable stand-ins for a passport at various sites inside Myanmar, meaning one does not always need to travel with the actual passport in hand.



General Visa Advice

Until just recently, it was mandatory for any visitor to Myanmar to have obtained a visa prior to arrival. Visitors to Myanmar without a proper visa were sent home on the first plane out, and it made any future visa requests by that person much more problematic. Several years ago, however, an airport **Tourist Visa On Arrival** office was established in Yangon. As this book goes to print, *Shwe Lan* is unable to confirm how, or even if, it works. And as rules can change at any time, one is advised to check relevant websites prior to one's trip. Signs outside the office indicate that it provides Business and Tourist visas, but yogis who wish to go this route are strongly advised to check official protocol and online discussion boards prior to their travel, as there are no guarantees. And regardless, many airlines may check to make sure you have a valid Myanmar visa before completing your ticket purchase, and will check again at the airport before allowing you to board the flight.

It needs to be stressed that obtaining a visa to Myanmar should not just be looked at as a mere formality that can be taken care of at the last minute. *It is strongly advised to take the appropriate steps to apply for and obtain a Myanmar visa before starting one's trip, whether that means applying in one's home country, or planning on doing so in a neighboring country.* In the past it was not a given that every visa application was accepted.

It's a good idea to check specific Myanmar discussion boards on websites such as *Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree*, *Travelfish*, *Fodor's*, *Virtual Tourist*, and *Trip Advisor* to get the most recent information about travel to and within Myanmar. *Shwe Lan's* own page, *BurmeseDhamma.org*, also plans to have such forums available. These sites plan to have a number of prior posts from past travelers that may instantly address one's question, and if not, one can pose one's own query.

Obtaining a Visa

Visas can be obtained from any Myanmar Embassy, either in person, by post, or through an agency. If you are already in the Southeast Asian region, the Myanmar embassies in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur are convenient and have good reputations for efficient visa services.

BANGKOK

The Embassy in Bangkok regularly deals with a large influx of requests, particularly for business and tourist visas, and has a quick turnaround of one to three days. Because of this, many yogis will plan a stay in Bangkok as the visa is being processed. It is sometimes possible to get a same-day visa, but you must tell the visa window that you are leaving the following day and bring a photocopy of your airline ticket or itinerary. If allowed, they will issue your visa by 3:30 p.m. that day, and it will be valid from the day of issue. Next-day and two-day visas are sometimes issued without proof of travel plans. As this book was going to print, the costs were:

- 1260THB (\$40 USD) for same-day visa
- 1035THB (\$33 USD) for next-day visa
- 860THB (\$27 USD) for two-day visa

The Bangkok Myanmar Embassy hours are 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. If one arrives at 9:00 a.m., expect to see sixty to eighty people already in line outside. The queue goes fast, but plan to allow at least an hour. Note that the Myanmar embassy is closed for all Myanmar as well as Thai official holidays. Also note that there are a number of agencies in Bangkok that specialize in quick turn-arounds, including many on **Khao San Road**. (At the time this book goes to press, the *Shwe Lan* editorial staff is not taking a position either for or against the viability of these agencies.)

Shwe Lan Discount!

If one ends up getting one's visa in Bangkok, just across from the Burmese Embassy is a vegan restaurant, *Bonita Café and Social Club*, run by a Thai-Japanese couple. They will give anyone going to Myanmar for meditation (and who can show the cover of *Shwe Lan*—electronically or otherwise) a five percent discount on their bill!

KUALA LUMPUR

Many yogis choose to go to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia when applying for visas as an alternative to Bangkok. A 28-day tourist visa generally takes three days to process. If one does not have a passport photo printed, but does have it on a flash drive, they can usually print the copies for a small fee. Opening hours are from 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. for visa applications, and 4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. for pick-up time. Approximate costs are RM80 (\$25 USD) for a normal application and RM150 (\$46 USD) for express.

OTHER REGIONS

If one is applying outside Southeast Asia where there is no Myanmar Embassy or Consulate, another possibility—in lieu of doing it by mail—is to go to a passport agency that specializes in international visas and pay an extra fee for them to take care of the visa process for you. One can also apply online; British and American nationals may find www.travisa.com helpful, while www.cibtvias.com has offices worldwide.

A Stamp for Joy

“Things are getting easier now, but in the past, getting an updated Burmese visa could be an anxiety-ridden experience. When my current visa was expiring, I’d board the Bangkok-bound flight expecting to be back to my life and home in just a few days, trying not to think about the other alternatives. I have witnessed tearful breakdowns in the Burmese Embassy office in Bangkok of other expats whose return was denied and their lives now at an unexpected crossroads, and I knew my

own renewed stamp was never a certainty if my name ended up somewhere that it shouldn’t have been. Fortunately I was always spared that fate, and every time I came to the Consular Office to pick up my passport, I did a little jump for joy when the new stamp was issued, extending my lifeline in the Golden Land several more months down the road.” Western meditator and expat living in Myanmar, 2007-2010

A NOTE ON BURMESE EMBASSIES

Like most diplomatic missions around the world, Burmese Embassies are a microcosm of their country and cultures. So, for those of you that choose to visit the visa section yourselves, you'll be treated to a sneak preview of the country. Generally speaking, the visa process within the office is not self-explanatory and can seem chaotic if you don't know the protocol.

The first thing to do is get a visa application form. They are available online; however if there is a slight variation in their particular office form compared to the online version, they may require the specific office version to be filled out, even if one has already completed an online form. Still, even if you plan to fill out the office application, filling out a printed online form ahead of time for practice will familiarize you with the kind of information you'll need to have.

In some embassy and consulate offices, visa application forms are out for the taking, while in others you'll have to wait in line to get one. Make sure to inquire how many copies of each form the office requires; in the past, two identical copies have been needed. After preparing all your materials and filling out the form(s), you'll need to get back in line at another window to confirm that the application is complete. Once the application form has been validated, you'll be given a number. When your number is called, you go to yet *another* window to actually submit the form. Then, you return at the appointed time to pick up the visa.

Following is information of Burmese Embassy and Consulate information throughout Asia:

Bangkok, Thailand

Embassy of the Republic of the
Union of Myanmar
Address: 132, Sathorn Nua Road,
Bangkok, 10500
Tel: +66 (2) 233-2237, 234-4698, 233-
7250, 234-4789, 237-7744
Fax: +66 (2) 236-6898
Web: www.myanmarembassybkk.com
Email: myanmarembassybkk@gmail.com

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Embassy of the Republic of the
Union of Myanmar
No.8C, Jalan Ampang Hilir, 55000, Kuala

Lumpur

Tel: +60 (3) 4251-6355
Web: www.myanmarembassy-kl.org
Open: 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for visa
applications.
Collection time: 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Singapore

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
Myanmar
15, ST. Martin's Drive, Singapore, 257996
Tel: +65 6735-0209, 6735-1672, 6735-
2035, 6735-3164, 6735-5263,
6735-6576
Fax: +65 6735-6236

Web: www.mesingapore.org.sg
 Email: ambassador@mesingapore.org.sg
 Open: Mon - Fri 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.,
 and 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Kathmandu, Nepal

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
 Myanmar
 Address: Nakkhu Height, Lalitpur,
 Kathmandu, G.P.O. Box 2437
 Tel: +977 (1) 5592774, 5592841
 Fax: +977 (1) 5592776
 Email: myanmaremb@wlink.com.np

Beijing, China

Embassy of the Union of Myanmar in
 Beijing
 Address: No. 6, Dong Zhi Men Wai Da
 Jie, Chaoyang District, 100600.
 Tel: +86 (10) 6532-0351 ext. 24
 Fax: +86 (10) 6532-0408
 E-mail: info@myanmarembassy.com
 Web: www.myanmarembassy.com
 E-mail: myanmarconsular@yahoo.com
 Open: Mon - Fri 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Seoul, South Korea

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
 Myanmar
 Address: 723-1, 724-1, Hannam-dong,
 Yongsan-gu, Seoul, 140-210
 Tel: +82 (2) 790-3814, 790-3816
 Fax: +82 (2) 790-3817
 Web: www.meseoul.org

Tokyo, Japan

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
 Myanmar
 4-8-26, Kita-Shinagawa, Shinagawa-ku,
 Tokyo, 140-0001
 Tel: +81 (3) 3441-9291
 Fax: +81 (3) 3447-7394
 Web: www.myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net
 Email: contact@myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net

New Delhi, India

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
 Myanmar
 Address: 3/50F, Nyaya Marg,
 Chanakyapuri,
 New Delhi 110021
 Tel: +91 (11) 2467-8822, 2467-8823
 Fax: +91 (11) 2467-8824
 Web: www.myanmarmedelhi.com
 Email: myandelhi@gmail.com
 Open: Mon - Fri 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Hanoi, Vietnam

Embassy of the Republic of the Union of
 Myanmar
 Address: 298A, Kim Ma Street, Ba Dinh
 District, Hanoi
 Tel: +84 (4) 3845-3369, 3823-2056
 Fax: +84 (4) 3845-2404
 Web: www.mehanoi.org
 Email: office@mehanoi.org
*(If you are a foreigner, you must have a
 Vietnamese temporary resident card and
 work permit to apply for a meditation
 visa)*



Types of Visas

28-DAY TOURIST VISA

This is the standard visa many travelers get. To apply, one needs:

- a valid passport
- two to three passport photos
- a copy of your passport photo page
- a completed application and a return flight reservation (sometimes requested)
- a hotel reservation in Yangon (sometimes requested)
- visa fee

*Note: Whichever visa one needs, one should **not** apply **earlier** than three months before one's planned visit to Myanmar, since the validity usually expires three months after the issue date.*

SOCIAL VISA

This lesser-known visa can be applied for by those who were born in Myanmar but presently hold other citizenship, or foreigners who marry a Burmese national.

BUSINESS VISA

These are good initially for ten weeks, but upon receiving one's third Business Visa, one can apply for a six-month visa with multiple entry. However, Business Visa holders are required to leave the country every ten weeks, even if it is just a short trip across the border. Getting a business visa requires:

- a sponsor letter from a valid Myanmar business entity
- the above information needed for the Tourist Visa



E-VISA

As this book was going to print, *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* had been trying to gather information on the best way to procure Tourist and Business visas online. The protocol has not been confirmed, so it is best to check recent forums before trying it out. Myanmar Immigration has set up the site www.myanmarvisa.gov.mm, which, when last checked, indicated that their online program was now “available to all tourist visa applications.” Further research found the site www.myanmarvisa.com, which is *not* connected to the official government, but which does seem to facilitate visas (including those on arrival). However, neither for this website nor for the E-visa can *Shwe Lan* offer any recommendation or commentary.

RELIGIOUS VISA (ALSO KNOWN AS MEDITATION VISA)

Note that if one is planning to stay overnight at monasteries or meditation centers, it is ideal to procure a Religious or Meditation Visa. Some monasteries and centers do not allow foreigners to stay even one night with unless they come with this specific visa.

The final type of visa, and a very important one for yogis, is the Religious Visa. This is also commonly referred to as a “Meditation Visa,” although the visa covers not only those wishing to engage in formal meditation practice but also those interested in studying other aspects of Burmese Buddhism (the stamp one receives in the passport is actually an “R” for “Religious”). Provided by the *Department of Promotion and Propagation of the Sāsana*, these are often initially valid for up to 90 days. Those who are considering applying for a meditation visa should first consider these important points:

- *This visa is only for those with a genuine interest in learning about Burmese Buddhism.*
- *To apply, one must have a letter from a government-recognized meditation center or monastery that states one is coming to Myanmar for Buddhist reasons, and will be studying or practicing at their site.*
- *A Tourist or Business visa can **not** be converted into a meditation visa; if already in the country, you must leave and apply from abroad.*

Theoretically, a meditation visa allows the holder to visit Buddhist sites, pagodas, and monasteries throughout the country. *However, this is entirely up to the discretion and policy of the sponsoring agency (i.e. the meditation center or monastery that has issued your welcome letter), as they are officially responsible for you for the duration of your visit in the country.* Some sites may be more relaxed in their policy and others stricter.

The meditation visa can be extended indefinitely—sometimes for even several decades, in the case of some long-term yogis—and can be done so without having to leave the country, because government servants are mindful that this would interrupt one’s Dhamma practice. The renewal process is done through the Department of Religious Affairs, and must either be completed by going to the office in person (with a Burmese translator if one is not fluent), or by having one’s sponsoring agency complete the procedure on one’s behalf. Extensions for lay people are six months and those in robes can get a full one year. Both presently cost \$90 USD, and must be processed at the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

As the renewal process can take up to ten weeks, yogis planning to stay longer than three months are advised to begin the renewal procedure soon after they enter the country. *It is each yogi’s responsibility to get this done in time or face whatever consequence may come as a result, such as getting the dreaded “overstay” stamp socked into one’s passport.* Finally, anyone who plans to extend their Meditation Visa past the initial three months will need to get a Foreign Registration Card (FRC), which must be shown upon leaving the country.

No matter how long one remains in the country, the Meditation Visa is almost always single-entry, meaning that once one leaves the country a new one must be applied for at a Burmese Embassy. In limited cases and for long-term foreign monastics, re-entry and multiple-entry meditation visas may also be available for a higher fee. For this edition, however, precise information is not yet available on the protocol involved, so *Shwe Lan* suggests reviewing current websites and inquiring at one’s monastery if one is interested.

Past yogis have reported that the Burmese Embassies in Asia, in particular New Delhi, Bangkok, Sri Lanka, and especially Kuala Lumpur have been said to be slightly faster at granting meditation visas. Meditation visas applied for outside Asia tend to take much longer.

■ THE MEDITATION VISA: A SERIOUS RESPONSIBILITY!

The Meditation Visa dates back to 1979, before which only a handful of diplomats and scholars were allowed in on specialized visas. Tourist visas at that time were hard to come by, and even if they were granted, the maximum period was only for seven days! This prompted the great Sayagyi U Ba Khin to lament that he couldn't impart his Dhamma knowledge in such a short window of time.

Many yogis today swoon over the thought that a meditation visa exists in Myanmar, and hope that this will open the gates for months of Dhamma practice in the Golden Land. The fact that the government provides this opportunity for dedicated meditators is indeed a sign of the nation's commitment to Dhamma practice at the highest levels. And this is not a new phenomenon—Prime Minister U Nu once offered state funds during the 1950s to any foreigners who wished to come to the country to learn meditation.



However, the process of applying and receiving a Buddhist study visa entails more than simply listing the number of courses you have sat or describing how you follow the Precepts. For this reason, attention to protocol and procedure is important. The expression “once burned, twice shy” is applicable here, as some meditation centers and monasteries have had experiences in the past of sponsoring a visa application or welcoming a foreign yogi to stay on their grounds, only to find he or she was really a backpacker or English teacher in disguise looking for an easy way to remain in the country. Unfortunately, such behavior has led some monasteries to be more hesitant when considering requests for sponsor letters, as past incidents have weakened their trust. The reality is that each yogi's actions—if they are in line with expectations and acting responsibly and honestly, or not—will impact the decisions that monasteries, lay people, and even government officials make about the Dhamma hopes of countless future yogis.

A Western monk in Myanmar has seen concerning signs of this already. He writes, “This situation has taken place over the past several years in Thailand to the point where a number of monasteries,

previously supportive of foreign yogis and the ordination of foreigners, no longer allow such opportunity, and meditation centers have had to impose accommodation and meal fees as many backpackers abused the hospitality and support of the locals. Now, the early signs of this same unfortunate turn of events are beginning to take place in some of the better known meditation centers in Myanmar.”

Concerning visa extensions, he adds that a “Sayadaw may wish to give the yogi the opportunity to continue practice for a long time with the impression that the yogi is sincere in his/her practice, but in some cases once extensions are received, the yogis leave the monastery for travel or use the monastic accommodations simply as free lodging. Some meditation centers now only allow a stay of three months maximum as a result and will not sponsor visa extensions beyond the initial meditation entry visa.”

It cannot be overstated that those who receive a Meditation Visa should be especially mindful to follow the rules and conditions of the sponsoring monastery, and use it with the right intention, otherwise future yogis may be not able to similarly enjoy the benefits of a meditation visa!

MEDITATION OR BUDDHIST STUDY LETTER

Whichever the visa one enters Myanmar with, an item that many yogis find especially useful is a letter attesting that the intent of one’s trip is for the practice of Dhamma. These letters have the potential for being very valuable and may go on to open doors in the future, as one may be exempt from such things as pagoda and other Buddhist-site related fees, and it can also help to clarify to officials what one’s intentions are in travel.

Before leaving home, the first step is to request a local area teacher or center manager to write this letter in English on the formal letterhead of the center. It is best if this includes such details as the one’s involvement at the center, the number of years of practice, and any other pertinent details. *It is also essential that this include one’s passport details and month and year of the intended travel.* Then, after arriving in Myanmar, one can present this letter at the meditation center or monastery where one intends to practice, and ask the office here to produce a similar letter in Burmese.

Finally, it is a good idea to make several copies of the letter, as some authorities may wish to keep one on file, as well as to keep a scanned version on a portable drive or on one's email.

"Uh-oh, I Need Another Passport Photo!"

If one starts running low on passport photos, a great place to stock up is at the shops under the base of Sule Pagoda in Yangon. Good quality prints are sold quite cheaply and take just minutes. They can even superimpose your face onto a suit or garment of your choice!

Don't Overstay Your Welcome

In the past, some visitors chose to deliberately overstay their 28-day visa period and upon leaving, paid a nominal fine of \$3 to \$5 USD per day. *Shwe Lan* does not encourage the practice of intentionally overstaying one's visa, even if it has not recently resulted in any serious repercussions. It is also an open question how—if at all—having "overstay" stamps in one's passport will affect future visits. Better be safe than sorry. Anecdotally, in this past, this was a real concern, although today it seems less so. What is certain is that one should in no circumstances plan to stay at a monastery with an expired visa, since this can lead to negative repercussions on the part of the monastery and the monks residing there. When yogis consider the various visa options for their stay in Myanmar, these are all important factors to keep in mind.

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

In spite of having a visa in hand, there are several regions of the country where one is not allowed without prior permission and the necessary permits. At the time of *Shwe Lan's* research, there were three such places that may hold particular attraction for yogis: (1) the Maha Myaing forest in Sagaing Division near Chin state; (2) Mogok, a region just outside Mandalay; and (3) Mrauk U, a Buddhist ruin site on the Arakan coastline. Requests to visit restricted areas can be made at the **MTT** (Myanmar Travel and Tours) office in Yangon (Number 77-91, Sule Pagoda Road, Yangon). You will need to supply the exact sites you would like to visit, a detailed itinerary, and the reason for the visit. ***Plan ahead at least two to three months.***

Why Not Stay a While?

Some meditators come to Burma on a meditation visa and never look back. There is a Western monk who arrived in the Golden Land many years ago, and ended up settling in the rural countryside as a recluse. Still living in Myanmar today, he leaves his kuti only for meals and a short walk, very rarely venturing outside the monastery compound. Every year, the monk hands over his passport to a supporter, who renews his meditation visa in Yangon. The supporter then brings the updated passport back to the recluse so he can continue his practice undisturbed. The monk generally writes only one letter a year. This is addressed to his brother, and is carried to the West by a foreign yogi, who brings back the reply from the recluse’s brother the following year.

Visa Summary

	Meditation visa	Business Visa	Tourist Visa
Advantages	• Can extend without needing to leave country. • It says what you are here to do: practice and/or study Dhamma! • Any registered monastery or center can sponsor you. • Can extend with different sponsors. • Less expensive.	• Possibility of multiple-entry. • Longer periods of validity. • Straight forward application process. • Freedom of movement.	• Simplest application process. • Freedom of movement. • Most common way to enter Myanmar.
Disadvantages	• Freedom of movement determined by monastery or meditation center. • Can take longer to apply and procedure can be less clear. • If monasteries don’t know the protocol or don’t speak English, can be challenging. • Usually single-entry.	• A business visa assumes you will be working or engaging in business, leaving less time for Dhamma practice. • More expensive. • Must leave country every 10 weeks. • Some monasteries or centers may have to confirm acceptance with business visa.	• Only 28 days, and may not be possible to extend. • Overstay might endanger future visits. • Must leave country to change visa status. • In the past, it has been difficult to repeatedly enter country on successive tourist visas. • Some monasteries or centers do not accept foreign yogis with a tourist visa.

PACKING LIST

ပစ္စည်းဟူသည် မျက်လည်မျိုး၊ ပညာဟူသည် မြတ်ရွှေအိုး။
 pyi sī: hū tī, mye. hlě. myö:, pye~ ñā hū tī, mya. ṣwe ö:

*“The possessions are impermanent as illusions,
 wisdom is like a noble pot of gold.”*

There is a Burmese proverb stating that one “goes to plough the field, but has forgotten the oxen” (လယ်ထွန်းသွား၊ နွားမေ့,, *lě thwu~: twā: nwā: mei*). There are some very helpful “oxen” one may want to bring along for one’s stay in Myanmar, and the following packing list helps the yogi to prepare. If it as though including everything below will make a heavy rucksack, well... they probably will! Best to balance this packing list with the words of one American monk, who commented, “I remember a would-be monk who spent \$2,000 USD before coming here to fulfill the list... now he is an extreme minimalist!” We have provided a list of many variables and possibilities for the yogi to consider, and as always, the balance is between going light yet having what one needs.

Recommended List

The following items are those which we suggest packing ahead of time to bring to your trip to Myanmar (*an [*] means that the item can also be easily procured once in Myanmar*):

- **Gifts:** For meditation centers, monks, and other Burmese you will meet in your travels. (see below for more details)
- **Guidebooks:**
 - *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* (!)
 - Standard Myanmar guidebook (e.g. *Lonely Planet*, *Rough Guide*, *Insight Guides*, etc.)
 - Burmese phrase book
- ***General toiletries**
- **Special toiletries:** The following kinds of toiletries are *not* readily available in Myanmar.
 - Natural mosquito repellent
 - Lip balm (although Myanmar is not very dry, but can be cool in the winter season)
 - Foot cream

- Your can't-live-without specialty health food items (e.g. flax seeds, grape seed extract, nutritional yeast, goldenseal, etc.)
- Wet towelettes
- Contact lens solution
- **Medicine Kit:** (see here for detailed suggestions)
- **Copies of documents:** At least two to three printed color copies of your Passport, Myanmar visa, and air tickets (**also see above**)
- ***Flash drive:** Essential to store vital information, passport copies, reservations, immunization record, health insurance, and photos from home. A suggestion is to have sufficient storage for exchanging files with friends you meet along the way.
- **Meditation letter:** Printed and electronic versions, from one's home meditation center or area teacher, explaining that one is coming for purposes of meditation or Buddhist study (for more information **refer here**).
- **Flashlight:** Some prefer a hands-free headlamp, others a flashlight fitted with rechargeable batteries, and others flashlights that can easily be plugged into a wall socket to charge.
- **Swiss Army knife:** (of course, this should be kept in one's check-in luggage)
- **Sewing kit**
- **Thermal underwear:** These are suggested especially for anyone planning to stay for extended periods in the Mandalay area during the cool season.
- **Shawl:** Some shawls can be found in Myanmar, but if one is looking for better quality or has a particular taste in shawls, it may be advisable to bring one's own or buy it elsewhere. Shawls serve a multitude of uses, from padding when sitting on hard surfaces to warmth when meditating or sleeping to unexpectedly chilly bus rides. They can also be used to cover oneself circumspectly when encountering a member of the Saṅgha.
- **Small lock:** One will likely not need to padlock one's possessions in Myanmar as some travelers do in India, but several universal master locks (available in many airports and travel stores) come in handy.
- **Earplugs/eye mask:** These are especially helpful when trying to catch some Zzzs in public and/or uncomfortable places, as well as on one's long plane ride over. They can be useful also because many Burmese sleep with the light on and tend to be

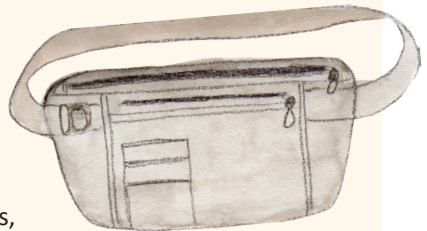
quite energetic in early morning hours.

- **Camera:** Remember to also bring a sufficient memory card and connecting cord. **see here** for more on photography in Myanmar.
- **Money belt:** Being able to have one's important documents with one at all times, but safely, is very useful and anxiety-allaying when traveling. **see here** for more on money.
- ***Clean bed sheet:** Some people also like to travel with their own pillowcase.
- **Mobile device to connect to Internet:** Unless one plans to forsake Internet and email altogether while in Myanmar, a mobile device that allows connectivity with relative ease is a big help. **See here** for more on Internet in Myanmar.
- ***Alarm clock**
- ***Electricity Converter**
- ***Umbrella:** This is helpful to have especially if one plans to be in Myanmar during the **rainy season**; fold-up versions are easy to travel with.
- ***Footwear: see sidebar.**
- ***Protection from heat and direct sun:** Such items as aloe vera, fold-up umbrellas, hats, etc. may be found in country, but note that salt tablets are **not** commonly available in Myanmar.

Warmer Clothes for Upcountry Travel

If one plans on spending time in upper Myanmar during the **winter months** (where it is slightly cooler), one should also prepare for cool weather even in this very hot country. The following items are probably a minimum:

- thermal underwear
- shawl
- several pairs of socks
- two pairs of long-sleeves and pants
- If one is susceptible to cold or wants to be extra careful, shoes, a wool hat, a scarf, gloves, a sweater and/or a light jacket are all worth considering as well.



Footwear

For Burmese, standard flip-flops easily purchased at any market are the variety most often worn, and the best option for most yogis. This is not surprising in a country where many grounds (inside as well as out) prohibit wearing footwear of any kind, especially monasteries and pagodas, and in a climate where excessive covering of the skin only increases discomfort. With traditional Burmese dress (longyis) in particular, flip-flops are considered the most appropriate footwear. Monks wear thicker, hard leather slippers (apart, of course from when they go on morning alms rounds on bare feet). Famous Sayadaws may wear a special kind of red flip-flop called *kat tee par phi nap*, which can be translated roughly to “velvet shoes.”



If one feels more comfortable in, or needs, Western-style sandals (such as Tevas, Birkenstocks, etc.), these are also culturally appropriate, if not entirely common to the culture. They will certainly last longer. Shoes or boots may only be needed if one plans to go trekking, or for a health-related reason. To reiterate: whichever kind of footwear one brings to Myanmar, an important consideration is that it comes on and off easily!

ALSO WORTH CONSIDERING

The following are also worth thinking about as one plans for the trip. While they are not recommended as strongly as the items on the list above, some yogis have found them helpful to have along. (*As above, an [*] identifies items which can be easily procured once in Myanmar.*)

- **Electronics:** Visitors may travel with all of the following without incident to Myanmar, either regarding theft, which is very rare in Myanmar, and/or any fear foreigners may have of government censorship:
 - Small laptop
 - MP3 player with speakers
 - Electronic reader (e.g. Kindle, Nook, etc.)
 - Smart Phone or tablet
 - *1 TB blank External Hard Drive, for sharing and receiving Dhamma files from other pilgrims, and receiving electronic material that may not be easily available outside of Myanmar.

- **Shorts:** Of course, this is not meditation center or monastery attire, and some yogis refrain from wearing shorts when in public at all. But even for very conservative yogis, shorts can be comfortable in the hot, humid climate, such as when lounging in one's room or in a space segregated by gender. Also, shorts are helpful if one happens to develop a leg rash and wants to prevent further irritation from rubbing against the fabric.
- **Swimming attire:** In Burma, this means long shorts for men, and a conservative one-piece swimsuit for women. Burmese women usually go swimming in full clothing, so depending on the situation and one's surroundings, women may wish to consider what to wear when around pools or the ocean. Of course, if one is staying at a plush four-star hotel, then one may be able to wear Western suits since this environment is considered outside of Burmese culture regardless.
- **Protective backpack cover:** This prevents curious folks from taking a look inside, and is protection against the elements.
- **Bags, bags, and more bags!** Plastic bags can come in handy in more ways than one might expect. Even in this age of plastic, the following types of bags are not easily found in Myanmar:
 - Ziploc © of all sizes
 - Laundry bags
 - Large garbage-style bags
 - Cloth bags (easy to carry and fill up when needed, and you can avoid accumulating extra plastic when shopping) These are widely used by local Burmese, often in place of backpacks and other hand-held luggage, and ideal for bringing back fresh vegetables and fruit from the market. One can even get a bag with an image or logo imprinted on it from one's hometown.
- **High-powered pocket laser:** Pocket lasers are useful when needing to clear the trees of crows. Most practical are those with enough strength to reach the tops of trees or those some distance away. Lasers are a much more humane way than the **slingshots** Burmese usually use to clear away one's feathered friends. If one happens to have a stopover in Bangkok, these can be easily found here, and one may wish to buy multiple items to give away at monasteries.



- **Photos:** Pictures of one's hometown, community, family, local meditation center, etc., will come in handy when making new friends. This can include printed copies to show, extra copies to give away, or an electronic album of some kind. **See here** for more on photography in Myanmar.
- **Blow-up bed mats:** If one is planning to go off the beaten track and needs more support than the usual wooden bed frame covered by a thin bamboo mat, blow-up mats are helpful.
- **Blow up cushions:** To bring or not bring, who would have ever thought this item would divide yogis so? On the pro side, these can be a lifesaver from the hard surfaces one will encounter from pagodas to monasteries, and from caves to shrines. On the con side, there is little that stands out more than a group of Westerners going through their collective “blowing-up” ritual before sitting. Burmese will just sit wherever, and deal with it.
- **Hot beverage making apparatus:** This is for those that still have this one noble attachment left of enjoying a hot drink. And, it is also worth noting that Burmese regularly bring their own thermoses and hot cups to meditation centers, filling up with hot tea at each mealtime. For example, one may bring:
 - Travel size thermos
 - Favorite teas or coffees
 - Hot water coil
- ***Duct tape:** While available in Myanmar, it is usually not as high a quality as what can be found in other countries.
- **Antibacterial hand sanitizer:** The travel size bottles are good to have when fresh water and soap aren't easily available.
- ***Good water bottle.**
- ***Various towels:** Note that quick-drying towels are *not* available in Myanmar. (Also, some appreciate a small handkerchief for keeping the dust from one's eyes and nose.)





■ MYANMAR SHOPPING LIST

In addition to the asterisked items above, the following can also be purchased in Yangon at any large shopping center, such as Ocean, City Mart, Super One, Asia Light, Junction Square, Sein Gay Har, Dagon Centre, Yuzana Plaza etc. One can ask one's hotel where the nearest shopping center is located.

- **Burmese clothing:** (see [here](#) for more details)
- **Chinese herbs:** If one is seeing an acupuncturist at home, the doctor's prescription may be able to be filled in Myanmar, and much more inexpensively to boot. There are also **Chinese doctors in Yangon.**
- **Scented nose-inhalers** (ရှုဆေးဘူး, *shu say bu*). Filled with local herbs, these are cheap, and great for blocking out unwanted city smells as well as preventing nausea on long trips.
- **Toilet paper and tissues.**
- ***Mosquito net:** Nets for sleeping are widely available in Myanmar; most meditation centers and monasteries also provide them. However, one may still wish to have one's own, and the sitting and tent types of mosquito nets are hard to find in Myanmar. REI, MEC, and Amazon are good options and have a large range in stock. One Thai company recommended is Karana



Travel Gear, as they make items for the monk and meditator in mind, and they do have an online store that ships abroad. **See here** for more on your friendly mosquitoes.

- **Shan bag** (ရှမ်းလွယ်အိတ်, *sa~: lwě ei*) These are traditional cloth shoulder bags, quite convenient—and appropriate—for any Dhamma trip. Some meditation centers and monasteries sell shoulder bags inscribed with their name and logo.
- **Jaggery**: Alternatively called palm sugar, this is a great natural pick-me-up, excellent for those on eight precepts, and wonderful to share with those around you. Oh, and also cheap! For more details on this Burmese sweet, await Chapter 6, *Burmese Days*.
- **Mosquito coils and lighter**: As referenced in the **Health** chapter, these can be useful for keeping **mosquitoes** away—at least for those that do not mind the smell. There are also natural mosquito coils that do not contain any of the chemicals found in the regular ones.
- **Fan**: For those extra sensitive to heat and/or sun, a fold-up fan is a big help.
- **Plastic twine** (ကြပ်ကြပ်ကြိုး(ခွေ, *cu. cu. cō: khwe*), : This has many uses, such as hanging mosquito nets, used as a line for clothes drying, etc.
- **Multi-socket power board**: If one plans on traveling in a group or has many electrical devices that require daily charging, this is worth picking up, in particular if it has surge protection. Related to this are **solar charging units**, which can be used in places with poor electricity.
- **Lantern**: The ones that can be charged in a wall socket are available in Myanmar; another good option are inflatable solar lanterns, such as the ones made by *Mpowerd Luci*. These would also be excellent gifts at monasteries without good electricity.
- **Wide brimmed hat**: The sun can be so intense in Myanmar that normal baseball hats don't always do enough to shield its rays. Some people prefer to purchase hats with long brims. There is even a little-used proverb about the Burmese style hat, *ṭai~: yě. tē. pē. kə lā, mō: ywā tī hne~. akha~. te~* (တိုင်းယက်သည့် ပက်ကလာ မိုးရွာသည်နှင့် အခန့်သင့်), which means “a rain hat of the right size worn timely as the rain unexpectedly falls.” In other words, be better prepared for the future by acting proactively in the present, just as taking the time to be measured for the right sized rain hat now, when it's not raining, will keep you dry if it pours tomorrow.



GIFTS

*“ Our culture about gifts is that you don’t need to bring something for anyone unless they are close friends. No need to give gifts to locals you meet at retreats but just something for the Sayadaw is appropriate. People do not expect gifts from foreigners unless they are beggars or the little street kids you see trying to sell you flowers. That said, almost no-cost gifts like ball-pens and calendars are not necessary, in fact it’s insulting. Back home you wouldn’t think a calendar or ball pen to be appropriate gifts, would you? If you do bring something from home, we all like useful gadgets as not much, or at all, are available here. If bought here, gifts should be what local yogis would give like regional food, fruit squash bottles, towels, etc. Just ask locals what to buy, or watch them. People bring gifts to the Sayadaw as a sign of respect but that is not a requisite thing you **must** do, either.”*

—Ma Thanegi, noted Burmese author

The world-renowned Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has said “the Burmese are reputed to be one of the most hospitable people in the world,” and her statement has been confirmed by the personal experience of just about every foreign yogi who has come to the Golden Land. Not only will many of your new Burmese friends and hosts go out of their way to help, guide, and give once they find you are here for Dhamma, they will also do so with a genuine joy. One cannot help but feel the same sense of generosity swelling up within oneself, and many visitors begin to think daily about what they can give in return. For this reason, we have prepared a guide to gifts that may be appreciated in Myanmar.



In-Country Purchases



These items are all found easily in country, so there is no reason to bring them to Myanmar. However, while many of these goods are sold in larger urban areas, they cannot be found in most rural sites.

- **School supplies, such as pens, pencils, erasers, notebooks, etc.:** These are readily available in Yangon and other cities. However, just because they are available, it doesn't mean that everyone can afford them. A suggestion is to stock up soon after arriving and have them on hand to give out as one travels around the country. If one is visiting poor regions or monasteries with attached monastic schools, this is wonderful dāna.
- **Business-card-sized laminated photographs of Shwedagon Pagoda or other cherished shrines:** These pictures, which are available at any pagoda site, are inexpensive, easy to carry and well received. Bring a stack to hand out to various people one meets. Going on pilgrimage to Shwedagon is a great volition for many Buddhists, and to have a laminated card with its image (and protective verse in Pāli and Burmese script) is appreciated. They make nice gifts even to meditators back in one's own country.
- **Calling/business cards:** Exchanging cards is a ritual in many Asian countries, and Myanmar is no exception. Try to get your name card made with English on one side and Burmese on the other, along with your contact details, and a quote from the Buddha or the Sayadaw in your tradition. You might even include your new Burmese name (see the upcoming Chapter 6, *Burmese Days*.) They are particularly valuable when meeting rural villagers who may well have no means of contacting you again, and your card may be a happy souvenir of your meeting. Inexpensive business-card printing shops abound on the middle blocks of 30th and 31st

streets in Yangon; a stack of 100 cards will set one back about \$5 USD and take a couple days to make. One can also contact **Muditā Works** to order these ahead of time, and have the cards ready prior to one's visit.

- **Instantly-Printed Photos:** Another nice idea is calling over one of the ubiquitous photographers to take a professional picture of one's group at a holy site. The prints are very cheap, and take only a few minutes. This is another gift that one's Burmese friends will appreciate, even those who weren't present then. Similarly, any photograph taken during one's visit can be reprinted inexpensively by simply taking one's camera or memory stick to a digital photo shop. Monks, nuns, and lay people alike will be quite joyful to keep them as a memory. **See here** for more on photography.
- **Candies:** Handing out candies is something of a Burmese "tradition." Health-conscious yogis may prefer to bring along sugar-free kinds available at home, or other treats such as fruits and nuts. As Ma Thangi reminds, "Casually handing out sweets to people sitting near you is ok, that is sharing, which we do all the time."



Gifts from Abroad

While there is much that can be purchased in the way of gifts in-country, some yogis wish to offer something that is especially unique as a way of showing their appreciation. The following are things that many Burmese people appreciate, but are hard, if not impossible, to find in Myanmar:

- **Honey:** It's not that Myanmar doesn't have honey—with an official Ministry of Beekeeping, the country takes its honey seriously! However, one may also wish to bring and offer special kinds of honey from home. Honey is a particularly nice gift for monks because it is not considered a food, so it can be enjoyed at any time of the day. Some monks will even have a small teacup of honey in the evenings. Similarly, **suck candies** are also appreciated since these are not considered "food" by monks (nor would many

concerned parents consider them as such!), and so can be taken at any time. For those American or Canadian yogis coming from **maple syrup** country, this is also a special gift.

- **Chocolate:** Like honey, this is also a nice gift for (some) monks—but note that for it to be taken in the afternoon, it must not contain dehydrated milk or traces of nuts.¹ Note that dark chocolate is less common in Myanmar, and also that hot cocoa is not drunk much—Burmese prefer to eat, rather than drink chocolate.
- **Specialty teas:** While Myanmar certainly has a lot of tea, varieties of herbal tea, health tea, and various types of loose-leaf tea can make nice gifts from home. Be aware that many Burmese are used to their standard green variety, and will want to just stick with it, while others may appreciate trying something new. In terms of tea as a gift for monks, some but not all may accept tea in the afternoon based on their interpretation of Vinaya, so it's best to inquire beforehand as to the monastic's practice.
- **Dried fruit**
- **Portable headlamps/flashlights:** As these are not easily available locally, they very useful since there can be frequent electrical shortages.
- **Electronic e-Reader or notebook:** If one wishes to spend a little more money on an especially nice present, consider an electronic device. This is appreciated in a highly literate society like Myanmar, allowing users to study English or access the Buddha's teachings in their own language. Such a gift should only be considered if one knows for sure that the recipient (monk or lay person) is electronic-literate or scholarly. Also, be advised that e-readers do not hold up well during the **Rainy Season**.
- **Electronic archive:** Burmese people are quite delighted to see other parts of the world practicing the Buddha's teachings. So an electronic archive of selected photos and video clips that show inspiring scenes of meditation centers, documentaries, etc., is a great gift. These can be shown digitally, or alternatively copies on

¹ Note that drinking chocolate after noon is common practice in the Thai tradition, but less so for Burmese monks, and will depend on individual adherence to the Vinaya. How a monk interprets this rule will affect not only if they can take chocolate (or tea) in the afternoon, but also how and if they can store it. This is because monks cannot keep any item that is considered a food after noon; any and all “food” must be offered daily in the mornings by supporters. If one is uncertain, one should really ask if it is appropriate to formally offer an item *before* actually attempting to do so.

a CD or flash drive given out, as well as printed copies of individual photos. Some monasteries do have some computers onsite, but poor Internet connections make access to such materials more challenging.

- **Multi-vitamins:** While vitamins are available throughout Myanmar, products from Western countries are especially appreciated. One could purchase a number of smaller bottles to give away or several bigger (or higher quality) ones to offer to senior monks.
- **Multi-tiered umbrella:** Companies such as Brookstone make these umbrellas that come with their own rain-fly, further protecting one from wind and rain. These will not only help those yogis planning to be in the country for **Rainy Season**, but make excellent dāna for monks¹ entering **Waso**.
- **Picture books and calendars of one's country or region:** Such items may show scenes from nature, animals, or local geography and people.
- **Other books:** One can consider children's books, either new or used—although if used, they should still be in acceptable condition. These may be donated to a school, orphanage, monastery, or individual family. English study books and magazines are especially valued, as yogi Samantha Wechsler discovered. She reports the following after finishing a meal with a Burmese friend, “He asked at the end of our meal if I had any English books I'd be willing to sell him; I've never been so disappointed by the fact that I owned a Kindle! I wished that I'd lugged books with me instead of obsessing about how to *pack light*.”

Warning—Limited Shelf-life

Many Burmese are keenly aware of what treats can only be acquired outside their borders. For this reason, it's not uncommon to be on a flight originating from Bangkok, Singapore, or Kuala Lumpur and see a Burmese passenger trying to stow away twenty steadily cooling packs of McDonald's fries or a couple dozen bulging bags of Krispy Kremes. These will be shared soon after arrival with grateful family members. But if one is not planning to reach a monastery until days later, this type of gift might not be the wisest!

1 For monks, umbrellas should be dark brown in color.



Shwedagon is as Sweet as Honey

Honey has an important Buddhist connection in Myanmar—it is said that the first food given to the Buddha after his enlightenment was honey-rice offered by some passing Burmese traders. In return, he gave them Hair Relics. Upon arriving back to their homeland, they presented the relics to the Burmese king at the time, and the story goes that the ruler then created Shwedagon Pagoda to enshrine them. Thus, Burmese honey is directly connected to the Shwedagon origination story.

WEATHER

Myanmar's weather system is affected partly by the annual monsoon, and partly by its own mountains in the north of the country. Because a typical guidebook for Myanmar already has detailed information on the climate found in various sites and regions, *Shwe Lan* mainly focuses on how these weather conditions will affect the yogi. Myanmar seasons are often described as cool, hot (or “dry”), or rainy. However, especially for someone coming from the West, a more apt characterization may be: Fairly Hot, Extremely Hot, and Hot and Wet.

■ FAIRLY HOT (AKA “COOL”) SEASON, (OCTOBER–FEBRUARY)

“The short cold weather of Lower Burma was over. As Royle facetiously remarked, ‘It begins on Boxing Day and ends on the second of January.’ March was in with its glaring sun and its gusts of wind that raised ‘sand-devils’ along the dusty roads.” Boxwallah, *The Leopard’s Leap*

The weather starts to cool down when winds begin to sweep across from the high Tibetan plains, passing over the Himalayas into Burmese lands. Just how “cool” does it get? To yogis from colder climates, “cool” may seem an odd, even inaccurate choice of term. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi once commented that the coldest Rangoon day would be considered a “fine day” in Kyoto, although Burmese residents drape themselves in their warmest clothing. But for the Burmese this is cold indeed. Elderly gentlemen cover their heads in woolen balaclavas when they go out for their early morning constitutional and old ladies drape knitted shawls over flannel or velvet jackets of a cut fashionable half a century ago.” An American yogi had a similar observation: “I was doing my own self-course at The Phyu Taw Ya in Hmawbi in late December. During the evening sits, I was still quite warm and was dressed in just a t-shirt and longyi. But every evening this Burmese man would come and sit down next to me and go through this little ritual. He would sit down already wearing pants under his longyi, and two long-sleeve shirts over a normal T-shirt. He would then proceed to put on wool socks, a sweater, a wool hat, a jacket, and just when I was about to tell him he was being too dramatic, two pairs of gloves. Then he’d start his sitting.” Needless to say, there are different levels of tolerance to weather systems and climate changes!

Even though it generally means more tourists and higher prices, the milder temperatures of the Fairly Hot season seem to be the most popular time for foreign pilgrims (although there tend to be fewer festivals during this period). These points are helpful to keep in mind:

- While the days are rarely frigid during this season, nights can get slightly chillier. One feels it in particular at monasteries with little bedding or insulation. It’s also important to remember that the monastery and meditation center schedule is an early one, and at 4 a.m. it can be cool in some places.

- Upcountry Myanmar (e.g. around the Mandalay area) has more extreme (relatively speaking) temperature swings than the rest of the country. It is hotter in the summer, and colder during the winter. If one plans on visiting this region during the Fairly Hot season, some warmer clothes will be needed. Consult the **“Recommended List.”**

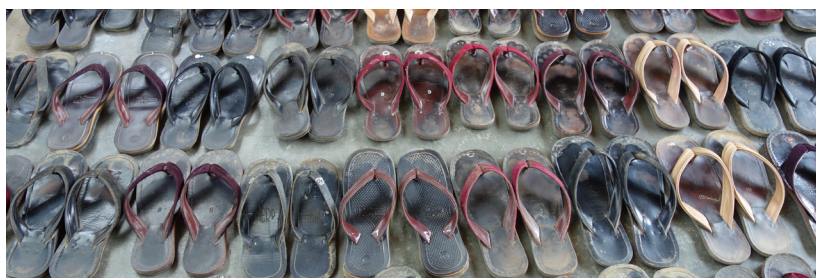
The Myanmar “Winter”

“[The Fairly Hot season] is the best season here; the nights are cool and comfortable, and the days are not unbearably hot. It has been said that Burma is ‘ten degrees hotter than hell.’ It may be so in the summer, but it is pleasant now.” M. M. Shoemaker, *Quaint Corners of Ancient Empires* (1899)

■ **EXTREMELY HOT (AKA “HOT” OR “DRY”) SEASON (MARCH-MAY)**

ရေဘူးနှင့် ဖိနပ် မပါ နွေးခါမှာ သိ၊ ဒါနနှင့် သီလ မပါ သေခါမှာ သိ။
ye bū: hne~. phāna. mǝ pā, nwē: khā hmā ti; dāna hne~.
tīla mǝ pā, te khā hmā ti

“Without a water pitcher and shoes one will suffer during the hot season. Without dāna and sīla, one shall suffer when close to death.”



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi described the “cruelty of April in Burma,” and it is true, even local Burmese are not immune to the brutality of this season. One often sees every inch of space taken up under the protective shade of the large *kou kō pe~* (ကုက္ကိုပင်) trees, or “Rain Trees,” and indeed it’s difficult to imagine how life would be possible in these regions without these generous giants. They commonly have wooden platforms built around the base of the trunk upon which one can rest, and a communal water pot will never be far off, either.

During this season, many Burmese may opt to sleep outside or douse their mattresses in water before going to bed; even then, few expect to manage more than just a few hours of sleep. The Department of Meteorology and Hydrology also issues frequent advisories on radio and television not to go outside after 11 a.m., or to wear light colored garments if going outside is unavoidable.

So, just how bad does it get? Pretty bad, to a degree that lies outside the past experience of many foreigners, even those that have traveled extensively! The Burmese may answer this question with the proverb *ne mye~. le, əyö: ye~. le* (နေမြင့်လေ၊ အရိုးရင့်လေ), meaning, “The higher the sun rises, the more foolish the foolhardy become.” However, the intensity and duration of the most intense periods of heat does differ from year to year, for this is related to the amount of monsoon rains the country gets and when the first monsoon sweeps through. One can—and definitely should—take precautions ahead of time, which keep one healthier and relatively more comfortable, and the effects of the heat less debilitating. The following are some notes and hints that may be helpful to yogis who plan on being in Myanmar during the Extremely Hot season:

- Look to the slightly higher elevations of Shan State as a refuge, particularly **Taunggyi, Kalaw, Pyin Oo Lwin**, and to a lesser extent, **Hsipaw**.
- For yogis spending time in low-lying lands, especially during the hottest periods, it is best to bring fabrics that allow for the skin to breathe. This is especially true for monastic environments where one must dress conservatively at all times, so it is helpful to keep covered in a comfortable and cool way.
- Remember that cities amplify the heat during the day, and retain it longer at night because of all the concrete and steel.
- The **Health Section** addresses this issue in more detail, and should be read carefully in order to prevent heat-related illnesses.

In spite of the intensity of this season and the above warnings, one distinct advantage of coming during this time is that it is by far the lowest season for tourists as well as yogis. Costs are cheaper and availability is never an issue, and monks and meditation teachers may have more time to spare. And if one goes to a region of the country with altitude, the extreme heat may be avoided.

Still, it's important not to underestimate just how hot it can get during this time and the health risks that can come if one is not prepared

A Hot Experience

“Unfortunately the only time we had to take our upcountry pilgrimage was April, just before Water Festival. I knew it was going to be difficult, but I was an experienced traveler and thought I could manage. I was really unprepared for what laid in store for us! The air was so hot outside our van that we couldn’t keep the windows down because it would literally scorch the skin. We had them down just a crack so we didn’t suffocate inside and that wisp of hot air was like a constant blow dryer on me. When we arrived at sites, sometimes we literally had to sit for up to fifteen minutes under the shade of a tree before moving, because we were afraid we were going to pass out. All in all it was an experience, but if I’m honest I have to say that it did take away from being able to appreciate the sites.” Western yogi, 2008

HOT AND WET (AKA “RAINY”) SEASON (JUNE-OCTOBER)

“Every year from February to May the sun glared in the sky like an angry god, then suddenly the monsoon blew westward, first in sharp squalls, then in a heavy ceaseless downpour that drenched everything until neither one’s clothes, one’s bed nor even one’s food ever seemed to be dry.” George Orwell, Burmese Days



Myanmar’s many proverbs and traditional sayings about the Rainy Season reflect its significance in Burmese history and culture. With rain so vital to a rural, farming culture, the season’s unpredictability is always cause for concern. One saying that relates to this is, “two things you can’t control

are the rain and bulls” ((ဗိုးနှင့် နွားသိုးအစိုး မရ, nwā: tō: hne~. mō: əsō: mē yā<)—and Myanmar surely has ample quantities of both. Another, somewhat derogatory saying describes the monsoon as being as tricky as a Burmese woman—that is, rain is expected every day, but no one

knows exactly when or how long, and it comes with little warning as darkening skies change places with shining sun. And a somewhat startling Burmese proverb about the monsoon is, “the black face will weep and the dead shall come to life” ((မျက်နှာမဲကြီး ငိုလိမ့်မယ်၊ သေသောသူများ ရှင်လိမ့်မယ်, *mye. hnā mẽ cī: ṇō lei~. mẽ, te to tū myā: ṣe~ lei~. mẽ*). When unpacked, the phrase refers to the black monsoon clouds that gather above the Bay of Bengal upon their approach to the Delta, and



pour out their contents on the parched land. In their wake, dead vegetation and hibernating animals (particularly frogs) come back to life and the country’s rivers begin to again flow with bountiful water.

In more straightforward terms, what happens is that the dry but scorching heat starts to dissipate as the first monsoon rains hit land, replaced by more refreshing winds and a heavy humidity. The heat by no means evaporates completely, but still, there is a palpable change in the air. Once again Daw And San Suu Kyi nicely captures what this season means to the Burmese people: “The word *monsoon*

has always sounded beautiful to me, possibly because we Burmese, who are rather inclined to indulge in nostalgia, think of the rainy season as most romantic.”

Burmese author Hpone Thant brings this local scene to life: “The land will once more be green again. Vast acres of paddy fields to feed the people of Myanmar and to fill the granaries with food. Typical scenes at these times would be a solitary farmer behind a pair of oxen tilling his land under the lashing rains, his dear wife and children waiting under the shade of the big rain tree, waiting for him to finish his work and join them for lunch. A simple farmers’ lunch, nothing elaborate. Heaps of steaming rice, a lump of *ngapi*, a clear veggie soup made from the vegetables found on the land near their modest hut... Unless the young paddies are planted carefully they might not ripen into golden stalks heavy with rice grains. Their songs float on the air despite the heavy monsoon rains that pelt them mercilessly. The peals of thunder and streaks of lightning forming a perfect background to

their singing. Those would be the typical scenes in all the farming communities in Myanmar. And nights would be filled with the sounds of the frogs, came back to life.” He notes that children love the rains too, as the common ditty, *We Shall Bathe in the Rains* (မိုးရွာရင် မိုးခေါ်ချိုးမယ်, *mō: ywā ye~, mō: ye chō: mē*) attests. Many villagers play Tug-of-War games and make offerings of coconut and bananas to the rain deity, *Moe Khaung Kyaw Swa Nat*.



So, what does the monsoon season mean for the yogi? If one is planning to travel or will be walking in the open, one will be dealing with the downpours, period—some coming with hardly a moment’s notice. So as one might expect, moving around during this season can be rather inconvenient. Note, too, that any yogis interested in sitting and/or residing in caves should keep in mind that this is the *worst* season for that, because the heavy, pervading dampness can be uncomfortable, and even dangerous to one’s health.

What one especially needs during this season are quick-drying garments and changes of clothes. Of course, a large umbrella and hooded rain jacket and rain pants are also helpful. Sandals more sturdy than flip-flops are recommended, for roads can become quite slippery and accumulating water can sometimes flow quite forcefully.

However, there are also some perks to planning one’s trip during the Rains. If one intends to stay somewhere for an extended period,

has a good roof overhead and proper ventilation, and doesn't mind the abundant frogs and occasional leeches that accompany this season, then one can pass a pleasant and productive "rains retreat." This is the traditional time that monks spend in serious meditation, which may provide some inspiration for one's own practice. Additionally, fewer people tend to come than during the winter months.

"They Open Wide."

"The rain may be limited to certain seasons... and it may not rain for days on end, but when it does rain you really know about it. This rain is a primeval thing. The clouds gather, dark and ominous and then they open. They open wide. Being caught in this sort of rain is like someone upending buckets of water over your head—one after another. The water hurls itself towards the earth with a force that means that close to the ground there is as much water bouncing up as there is coming down. But after a short while, at least for routine downpours, the scene is transformed, the sun comes out, everything steams for a while and ten minutes later you would not know there had been any rain." Patrick Forsyth, *Beguiling Burma*

Rain on the Water

"Sunsets on the river were spectacular, especially since we were not yet out of the monsoon season. There were enough clouds in the sky to provide a canvas for the sun's palette of scarlet, gold, mauve, and vermillion. At one turn of the river on our first day out, the water was as smooth as a mirror, placid and silken, as it reflected the brilliant evening colors." Ma Thanegi, *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*



HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS

“When a Burman is born there is a pwe [celebration]; when he is named there is a pwe; when a girl’s ears are bored; when the youth enters the monastery; when he comes out again; when he marries; when he divorces; when he makes a lucky speculation; when he sets up a water-pot; builds a bridge; digs a tank; establishes a monastery; dedicates a pagoda, or accomplishes any other work of merit; when there is a boat or horse race; a buffalo or cock fight; a boxing match, or the letting loose of a fire-balloon; a great haul of fish, or the building of a new house; when the nurseries are sown down, or the rice garnered in; whenever in fact anything at all is done, there is a theatrical representation. Finally, there is a pwe, as grand as his friends can make it, when the Burman dies.”

—J. George Scott, *The Burman*

As Scott points out, it’s hard to avoid seeing a pwe while in Myanmar, so no matter when one arrives, there is bound to be some Buddhist-themed event or another. Some visitors build their itinerary around being able to join a pwe... while others do everything they can to avoid them. The purpose of this section is just to name the major festivals that are most likely to affect a yogi’s stay at a monastery; there are simply too many local pwes to list comprehensively here. The following celebrations are each described in more detail in the upcoming Chapter 6, *Burmese Days*.

■ **Burmese Buddhist New Year:**

- **Burmese name:** *Thingyan*
- **Also called:** Water Festival
- **When:** mid-April; officially 3-5 days, unofficially 7-10 days
- **Impact on yogis:** If one has a choice of when to come to Myanmar, and has already decided to ignore the warnings and brave the heat of April, Thingyan gives one yet another reason to reconsider. Splashing water for a day or two can be fun on a hot summer day, but what isn’t fun are overcrowded meditation centers and monasteries, under-age-and-over-drinking in public areas, closed businesses, clogged roads, and (often dirty) water sprayed, blasted, and launched in all

directions—including one's own, whether one likes it or not. Of course, it's not 100% awful, and less intense in the villages than in urban areas, but some foreign meditators do choose to avoid this holiday where possible.

■ Rains Retreat

- **Burmese name:** *Waso*
- **Also called:** Buddhist Lent
- **When:** June-August
- **Impact on Yogis:** Whether in or out of a meditation or monastic retreat, the rainy season requires preparation and some real work. Since the Buddha's day, monks in many Buddhist countries refrain from any kind of travel for the duration of the Rains Retreat. In many ways, staying at a monastery during Waso can be nice, as there tends to be minimal disruptions, and monks tend to meditate more ardently during these months. However, this is not the case at all monasteries. During Waso, some less-than-dedicated monks and yogis are also known to crowd into monasteries at the same time.

■ Festival of Lights

- **Burmese name:** *Thadingyut*
- **Also called:** End of Lent
- **When:** Full Moon of October
- **Impact on Yogis:** This holiday will not greatly affect one's actual Dhamma practice, and may be nice to participate in. At monasteries and pagodas throughout the country, the faithful light and place millions of candles, making any site look like it's ringed by a glowing aura. Thadingyut is considered an auspicious time for beginning a pilgrimage. If one is in Myanmar, a recommendation is to go to one's favorite holy site to see it lit up in a golden glow.

■ Full Moon Days

- **Burmese name:** *la< pyë. Ni* (လပြည့်နေ့)
- **Impact on Yogis:** Because the Buddha is known to have been born, reached full Enlightenment, and passed away at the first light of dawn after a full moon night, they are particularly auspicious times in Buddhist countries. Buddhists may visit pagodas, make offerings at monasteries, listen to Dhamma talks, light candles and incense sticks, take on additional precepts, abstain from meat, offer a feast, meditate, or chant throughout the night. Some will leave their homes in early

morning and stay in monastic environments for the remainder of the day. Most pagodas also stay open longer than usual on full moon days. Whether one is in a village or city, at a monastery or meditation center, it's inspiring to see what Burmese make of the full moon experience.

Oh, Those Full Moon Days & Nights!

Full moon celebrations in Myanmar target something specific, such as donating robes, lighting candles, stargazing, etc. according to the particular festival or history. The term *uposatha* (often translated as “holy days” or “duty days”) is used to describe the four phases of the moon: the crescent moon, full moon, waxing moon, and new moon. The highly devout will follow all four days assiduously; the less so will give importance to the new and full moons, with the full moon day being the most critical. In many rural regions, village elders wear their best clothing the night before the uposatha, and may walk through the streets chiming gongs, reminding those residents who wish to observe uposatha that they can start the next morning. Generally speaking, the uposatha days are more closely followed during Waso. For more on Full Moon festivals, await the upcoming Chapter 6, *Burmese Days*.



“I just kept feeling more and more energy around me...”

“I’d had a pretty busy work week in Yangon and one day, found I could take off a couple hours earlier than usual. I decided to walk to Shwedagon and sit there for some time until evening approached. I loved coming here in late afternoon, because it’s usually not so crowded then, and this day was no different. I found my usual spot, which is kind of in the back from the main circular walkway, and sat there to meditate. As the hours continued to pass, I had this funny feeling, but being a ‘serious meditator’ I trained myself not to open my eyes and look around. But, I just kept feeling more and more energy around me as the afternoon became evening, and it didn’t seem like it was just me. Finally I opened my eyes and found myself literally in a sea of people. I was shocked! As I walked around, I saw hundreds of people everywhere, entire families, and thousands of candles on every surface, glowing so beautifully. It was only later that I learned I’d been sitting as the entire celebration of **Thadingyut** took off around me.” American expat, working in Yangon 2007-2010

MONEY

"People lose even a little bit of money and Oh! How they cry! How about the billions of kusala they are losing every second? Nobody knows to cry over that."

—Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw



နည်းရောင်း များရောင်း တောင်းပြည့်။
nī: yau~: myā: yau~:, tau~: pyi

“[Whether] selling at either a higher or lower price, the basket eventually fills with money.” A Burmese proverb indicating that, similar to how one’s paramis are fulfilled, continual drops eventually bring about a full basket.

Until 2012, money issues for foreigners could be summarized by four short words: “Bring what you need.” Until recently, there was almost no way to acquire emergency cash funds. Now, this is all changing, as private banks and domestic credit cards are appearing on the scene for the first time. However, because the country’s nationwide monetary systems are going through such an overhaul, ***yogis are still advised to bring as much cash as they expect to need for the duration of their stay, just in case an unexpected problem develops.*** Indeed,

any perusal on Myanmar discussion boards will show you that the new systems are far from smooth, and Myanmar is still largely a cash-based economy.

Burmese currency is the kyat (pronounced “chat”). As of March 15, 2015, the exchange rate was 1 U.S. dollar to 1036.5 kyat. In 2009 it was as high as 1300, and then dropped to 700 not long after, so keep in mind that the kyat may be subject to sudden, wide fluctuations, and one should always check online for the most accurate rate before traveling. Dollars can sometimes be used in a pinch, but in most situations kyat is preferred. The major exception is that most hotels will accept American dollars, and some government fees also can be paid in dollars (such as special boats or pagoda entrances). Euros, yen, and yuan are beginning to be used but still not as widely accepted as U.S. dollars. They may also get a lower exchange rate. Keep in mind that in Myanmar every full moon day is a public holiday, so these dates (in addition with weekends and other national and religious holidays) will be harder days—and likely more expensive—for changing money.

Although the financial sector is modernizing, some old habits die hard. While the following suggestions were mandatory only a few years back, it is uncertain how critical they still are today. However, they are shared here in the spirit of “better safe than sorry.”

- All U.S. dollar bills should be in mint or near-mint condition. If there are creases, folds, stamps, writing, smudges, tears, or other such blemishes, one may have to accept a lower exchange rate, if they can be exchanged at all. (In fact, a kind act you can do upon leaving is offering to exchange friends’ blemished \$100 USD notes for any good ones you still have.)
- Traveler’s Checks are **not** accepted.
- Bills printed after 2006 are best.
- Exchange rates are higher for \$100 denominations, and lower for \$50, lower still for \$20, etc.
- In the past, bills with serial numbers starting with AB, FB, or CB were often refused. The reason for which has been much discussed but never definitively known. Thankfully, this is less common today. However, it’s still good to know as one prepares for one’s trip, just in case.

With most of the sanctions now lifted, ATMs are appearing for the first time throughout the country, and many Burmese are now receiving their first-ever credit card from local banks. As this book

was going to print, Burmese ATMs were able to process many (but not all) foreign credit cards for a use fee of 5,000 kyat, with a maximum withdrawal of 300,000 kyat. Some ATMs have been known to run out of cash and take several days to restock, while others do not work on evenings and weekends. Now there are even ATMs on the upper terraces of Shwedagon Pagoda! As the situation is changing so rapidly, it would not be so helpful to list here the cards that are presently acceptable. Therefore, one is encouraged to consult the Internet prior to departure and make the appropriate arrangements for bringing and having access to sufficient funds for one's stay.

Until this year, expats held long debates about where the best exchange rates were in Yangon, because it was not possible to change money at banks or other offices, and one had to be very careful. For example, anyone who exchanged money around the most notorious areas of Bogyoke Market and Sule Pagoda needed to count every bill prior to completing their transaction. Also, most hotels were known to give an unfavorable exchange rate. A back room near the flower shop in the **Summit Parkview Hotel** used to be the favorite place for making exchanges for many expats “in the know.” These days—depending on who one asks—it's a place near the Thai Embassy on **Ma Naw Hari Street**, who also change other foreign currencies as well as dollars.

But it's not really all that “hush-hush” anymore—it is now possible to change money right after exiting customs at the international airport, as well as at government offices that are springing up in many places. These new, official moneychangers give a fair rate (unlike in the past, when the official rate was six kyat to the dollar even as the unofficial one soared to 1,200 kyat!), so this is one less “adventure” to deal with. If possible, it's good to get a variety of kyat notes of different denominations, as they give you more options for offering formal dāna at a variety of pagodas and monasteries.

In the past, foreigners also have had to occasionally deal with Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC) notes. These mostly unwanted bills were printed by the Myanmar government and said to be the equivalent rate of U.S. dollars, but they would exchange for a slightly



lower amount on the market. Currently, it appears that they are slowly being phased out, and in any case, they are *not* recommended. Also, for a very hefty transaction fee, Yangon luxury hotels have been known to accommodate foreigners by drawing on money from their credit cards, but this did not always work; and even when it did, there was the downside of excessively steep service fees. More recently, Western Union has come to Myanmar, and this is now another option of accessing funds. Some yogis have wired themselves money before leaving, and then drawn on those funds throughout their trip in Myanmar for *dāna* and other costs.

Got Change for a *Kahāpana*?

Though the value of the different coins used in the Buddha's time have been lost, their names are still known: *pāda*, *māsaka*, and *kahāpana*, with the latter being the most common coin. While coins used to be part of the circulation in Myanmar, now even the smallest denominations only come in bills, though old Burmese coins (as well as some old bills) can still be found in antique shops.

“HOW MUCH MONEY WILL I NEED?”

The answer to this very common question depends on your answers to the following:

- What quality of hotels do you plan to stay at?
- How long will you be traveling versus staying at meditation centers and monasteries? (In the latter case, of course, expenses for travel, room, and board will be much less.)
- How much *dāna* do you want to keep on hand?
- How long is your stay in the country?

In answering these questions, the following expenses (in U.S. dollars) can be used to estimate costs:

- Hotel as well as guesthouse costs are skyrocketing because the tourist boom has created far more demand than the cur-



rent supply of rooms can meet. As of this writing, the cheapest rooms are \$20 per night, \$12 for dormitory, and a midrange hotel is around \$50. Higher range hotels will, of course, be much more.

- Staying at monasteries and meditation centers should certainly not be looked at as a way to save money. However, if one intends to stay at a center or monastery for a pure Dhamma reason, one can give *dāna* according to one's resources, even if it is less than one would like. Also keep in mind that even if one is not able to give funds, another way to give *dāna* may be through service. There is always an opportunity to give as one desires and is able while at monasteries.
- The most expensive one-way bus ticket is currently about \$35, while one-way plane fares range from \$60-120. A one-way bus from Yangon to Mandalay will cost between \$10-20, depending on the level of service.
- Eating can still be done on a budget, at \$1-5 per meal, depending on the kind of food and place to eat that one prefers.
- *Shwe Lan* presently estimates that at the time of publication, a minimum daily allowance, outside of monastic life, of about \$40-60 would be needed to meet basic expenses. To give an impression of how fast prices are jumping, one travel website advised visitors to multiply the prices given in *Lonely Planet's* 2011 guide by three or four.

The Buddha on Money

When speaking about money, the Buddha used the metaphor of a snake. If one was able to catch a snake behind its head, it may be of some use, such as to tame it, to milk the venom, etc. In any case, it can't harm you. But if you do not take care to catch a snake properly, it will certainly bite you and go on to cause great suffering. Money is no different. If you have money and use it nobly, then it is certainly a good resource to have, and can further help in allowing one to do greater meritorious deeds. But if you don't "catch it" right, and you want money to satisfy greed or hatred, it will certainly come back to bite you, causing great suffering. Monks, of course, are not allowed to handle money at all.

MISCELLANEOUS MONEY MATTERS

- Don't worry about changing money the moment you reach Yangon if you happen to arrive late at night or early in the morning. It's always possible to negotiate a taxi fare in dollars, and exchange money at the hotel the following day.
- In the past, the day of the week (and even the time of the day) actually made a difference in the exchange rate, since the availability and work schedule of the moneychangers affected the rate itself. This may not be the case anymore, but just in case, Wednesday was known to have the best rates, and Sundays the worst.
- It's a good idea to bring a small supply of American dollars in lower denominations, such as ones and fives (also ensuring they are near-mint). This is because there are some “foreigner fees” you will be requested to pay in dollars rather than kyat, such as various buses, trains, museum entrances, etc.
- If you wish to give *dāna* to monasteries in dollars (rather than kyat), it's a good idea to request beforehand if this is convenient for them. Generally speaking, monasteries that are closer to urban centers or used to receiving foreigners may accept dollars, and one of the monk's attendants will know how to handle the foreign currency. If you do give dollars, as noted above, make sure they are in near-mint condition, and also be aware higher denominations will be easier for them to change. For more about *dāna* practices, await the upcoming Chapter 7, *Monastic Life*.

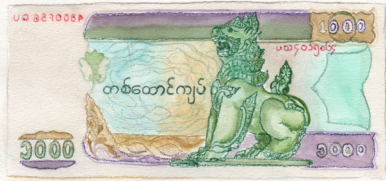


Spearmint, Kyat, or Raspberry?

At many shops and stores, when vendors happen to run out of small kyat denominations they may give you your change in gum sticks, leaving one to ponder the mystery as to how shop owners can almost universally guarantee an ample flow of chewing gum, but routinely run out of small kyat notes...

A Fistful of Kyat

Just a few years back, the largest bill denomination was 1,000 kyat. With the exchange rate much higher than what it is today, this meant that changing American dollars gave one an extremely heavy wallet to cart around. Before the recent advent of modern banking, many Burmese kept quantities of the notes in private homes as their “bank.” So it was not uncommon to come across bills smelling like mothballs, having been in someone’s home stash at some point, and then put back into circulation when the need arose. One former foreign Embassy employee recalls a time when his program had \$10,000 left in its budget, with only a week remaining in the fiscal year to make use of it. “Every day I called in different money changers from all over the city to change a few hundred here and a few hundred there. I finally got it all changed into kyat by that Friday. I had to find a secure place to store so many boxes of the cash... I can say that my transactions alone probably changed the whole exchange rate that week in Myanmar!”



TRAVEL OPTIONS

သွားပါများခရီးရောက်

twā: pā myā:, khayī: yau

“As you continue on, you cover the journey”

In Chapter 2, the different modes of transportation for traveling around Myanmar are described in detail. This section looks at more general travel considerations one may need to know prior to landing, such as issues regarding age, gender, traveling alone or in a group, etc.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

With Myanmar’s rapid rise as a hot tourist destination, the number of travel agencies has grown exponentially. This has led to both positive and negative results, and is an ethical consideration for yogis traveling in the Golden Land.

There certainly can be advantages in going through a travel agency. Good ones can efficiently make the travel arrangements and save one hassles and time. They can be especially appealing to those yogis who have only limited time available, are coming in a large group, or are elderly or not in good health. Travel agencies can be found in one’s hometown, in Myanmar itself, online, or by consulting a guidebook.

On the other hand, while there has been a recent growth of tour packages that promise “adventures” into Burmese Buddhism, most of these may not be suitable for the yogi who wishes to go past the surface layer and really taste the essence. What is worse, many of these tours are conducted without proper respect for monastic culture and the monks’ Vinaya. On these tours, tourists (men as well as women) are often allowed to wear inappropriate clothing during monastery and pagoda visits, and large groups are encouraged to wander around taking photos before meeting the Sayadaw and paying respects (if that occurs at all). These kinds of tours even organize visits to traditional and discipline-heavy monasteries such as Maha Gandayon in Amarapura, thinking more about their clients’ satisfaction and preferences than the local communities.

One exception to this trend is **Muditā Works**, about which more information can be found in the **sidebar**.

Help Us Help You!

As this is the first edition of hopefully many more, *Shwe Lan Ga Lay* hopes to rely on the helpful input of yogis who visit these sites and report back their findings to improve the accuracy and reach of our guide. This may include sites entirely left out of the book, or sites where the information is now outdated. Reader feedback may cover any area, for example information regarding accommodations, Buddhist and other sites of interest to yogis, monastic experiences, recommended travel guides or agencies, restaurants, etc. The more information this guidebook can get, the more valuable it will be for yogis.

*We'd like your help in making future editions of Shwe Lan an even more valuable resource for the foreign yogi in Myanmar! Please share anything you think will be helpful by emailing Shwe Lan at **burmadhamma@gmail.com***

Muditā Works

For those yogis who wish to have some help in planning their trip and reaching hard-to-find sites, a common question is what travel agency to use, as some are more interested in making a profit than anything else, even if it means exploiting Myanmar's Buddhist treasures to make a fast buck. While many Burmese travel companies do offer "Buddhist trips," sadly, most feature only superficial excursions and build up the "exotic" credentials of the site rather than calmly going into the context and history. On the other hand, many meditators wish to support an agency that shares their values and respect for Myanmar's Buddhist cultural heritage, history and practice.

For this, *Shwe Lan* recommends **Muditā Works (MW)**. M.W. was founded by some of the main contributors of *Shwe Lan*, so one of its primary goals is to provide more authentic, respectful, and appropriate pilgrimage tours and other services for those yogis who desire a richer exploration of Burmese Buddhist practice and history. Their tours are also the only agency that incorporates the comprehensive information in this guide. MW charges reduced rates to meditators, and donates a percentage of profits to worthwhile local causes.

For more information, contact M.W. at info@muditaworks.com. Their website is www.muditaworks.com.

TRAVELING SOLO

လမ်းသာမိ၊ ခွေးနောက် လိုက်။
la~: tā mi, khwē: nau. lai.

“If the road is unknown, follow the dog.”

As daunting as it may appear to some, traveling by oneself can be one of the best ways to connect with fellow Burmese yogis and make local Dhamma friends. And as long as one travels smartly, safety concerns are rarely an issue. By going solo, one can become totally immersed within Burmese monastic culture, allowing a more direct experience of local traditions and practices. Additionally, because it is uncommon for Burmese to make pilgrimages unaccompanied by at least a busload of their family and friends, many Burmese yogis may go out of their way to support a single foreign yogi. Finally, for those wishing to develop their Burmese language skills or to more deeply understand Burmese Buddhist culture, going to a monastery where one is the only non-Burmese present can be quite helpful.

WOMEN YOGIS

“In my country it’s a criminal offense to even grab a woman’s hand without her consent. Liable to six months in jail, you guys, remember that.”

—Ma Thanegi, *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*

“And yet, with all their freedom, Burmese women are very particular in their conduct.”

—Harold Fielding, *Soul of a People*

There are no special precautions that female meditators need to keep in mind when interacting in Burmese society, aside from applying standard common sense and being safe as one might do in any context. Indeed, many female yogis coming from India remark on the more obvious public presence of women in Burmese society.

Some women have asked how they should behave with their spouse or partner while in Myanmar. While out and about, couples can engage in appropriate (i.e., moderate) public displays of affection (PDA), as young Burmese couples may also be seen doing. Generally there is

more freedom in this area than can be found in countries such as India, or in Muslim countries in particular. However, it is important to keep in mind that Myanmar is still a conservative society, and while there are no hard and fast restrictions on what women can wear in public, displaying large amounts of skin is not appropriate. Burmese women survive the country's hot weather by wearing very thin clothing, though not thin clothing that deliberately draws attention to the body.

So, ultimately, what can a foreign female yogi expect in Myanmar? Relating specifically to the Buddhist experience, a foreigner of any background can usually expect to get the royal treatment at Buddhist sites as Burmese are brought up to respect and honor their guests. At many monasteries and meditation centers, there will usually be no difference to what is offered to the different genders. When there is a difference, it may come in the form of a slight advantage for men in their room allocation, toilet access, food, and meditation space. Keep in mind, while sleeping quarters are always segregated, dining halls will vary according to the monastery. There are often spaces specifically set aside for female yogis. Even most small monasteries welcome female yogis, though if there are not suitable accommodations available within the compound, other arrangements may need to be made. An especially welcoming place for female yogis is in the Sagaing Hills, as this area is home to the most nunneries and practicing nuns of the country.

Elsewhere in *Shwe Lan*, more specific information for women in monasteries is detailed. For example, specific information about monastic discipline can be found in Chapter 7; more extensive information for female yogis about monastery stays, pagoda visits, and interactions with monks can be found in Chapter 7.2.6; and one can learn more about overall gender relations in Myanmar society in Chapter 6.

Women Traveling

"In the same way, pilgrimages are holiday trips that women can go on in groups, with neighbors, friends, or relatives. A woman travelling alone is rare, even in matters of trade where women take the lead—which is not surprising in a culture where a 'good' girl would not stroll alone to the corner store after dark. Most people are conservative and have deep respect for traditional values." Ma Thanegi, *The Native Tourist*

Making Friends

“Over the course of the week many of the nuns and lay women in the hall were incredibly sweet to me, and some of the ones who sat by me seemed to want to take me under their wings. They showed me how to change my sitting from meditation to chanting postures, offered me bug sprays or nets in the evenings, and at one point a lay-woman approached me while sitting to give me an English [Dhamma book]. After I was there for a few days I was abducted by a group of nuns in the break before the Dhamma talk and taken past the dining hall to a golden pagoda that I didn’t even know was on the premises.” American female yogi, Pa Auk Monastery

OLDER TRAVELERS

Burmese are brought up to see the value in respecting one’s seniors. Being able to serve one’s elders (and especially while at a monastery or pagoda) is an opportunity for great merit. For example, an older yogi staying at a monastery or meditation center will likely be provided with some of the more comfortable or private quarters; if an elder yogi wanted tea, the staff and monks would be delighted to help. One American yogi in her sixties found she was often not able to wash her own dishes, because younger Burmese women would seek to gain merits by kindly take her dishes to complete the job.

That being said, older travelers used to a certain level of comfort and basic necessities may find life at some rural monasteries rather difficult. This can include cold showers, dust, little padding, mosquitoes, and little privacy. If you find that these conditions are affecting your overall health and impeding your practice, it is much better to make arrangements to stay at a nearby hotel and come to the monastery during the day. Or, one can make arrangements to stay at monasteries that have more modern amenities. On that note, as a matter of health, older travelers are also advised to help themselves by planning more comfortable travel where available. This may include arranging the hotel to call an air-conditioned cab rather than waving one down on the street, taking a plane or hired car instead of a bus, and treating oneself to massages and comfort foods where available. For more hints, consult the **Health** section.

Traditional Values

“Nowadays one element of the celebrations consists of families gathering together and children paying respect to their parents and giving them small gifts. The parents repay this gesture by offering good advice and maybe small amounts of money. Well just imagine! I cannot see this catching on at home, where too many parents have a job to give their children any advice at all and, at worst, get little from them by way of respect. Powerful traditional values are just one thing that gives Burma its unique character.” Patrick Forsyth, *Beguiling Burma*

TRAVELING WITH CHILDREN

“Today the novice Sukha saw ditch-diggers leading the water in a watercourse, arrow-makers straightening their arrows, and carpenters fashioning wheels and so forth. And having seen these things, he subdued himself and attained Arahantship.” (p. 327)¹

*“Don’t miss the precious opportunity to
raise your children well.*

*Only a well-adjusted child grows into a well-adjusted adult.
And it is a well-adjusted adult who will contribute positively
to society.”*

—Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw

While certainly adding a layer of complexity to one’s trip, traveling with young children—or with one’s entire family for that matter—can be a wonderfully fulfilling experience for foreign Buddhists and meditators. While this may not be the norm for the average foreign visitor, it is very much in line with Burmese Buddhist culture. Indeed, in her book *The Native Tourist*, Ma Thanegi comments on this “truly Myanmar nature of taking kids



1 Burlingame, E. W. (1921). *Buddhist Legends*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

everywhere.” While Burmese children are never present at adult meditation retreats, many Burmese love nothing more than to make merit with their family and friends, and will do so by traveling together to pagodas and staying at various monasteries along the way. For their part, Burmese children never look happier than when they are at a monastery, whether meditating, studying, helping out, or just playing. Having extended time with one’s family, learning about Buddhist culture and teachings together, and getting into the rhythms of monastic life is a great joy that few Western families are fortunate enough to experience.

*That said, it cannot be overemphasized that bringing one’s children to a monastery is **not** for those just interested in collecting new and unusual travel experiences, but **only** for families genuinely wishing to help their children start to develop in Dhamma.*

The Burmese view of bringing children to monasteries is also in line with the Buddha’s teachings on this topic. The Buddha proclaimed that passing on the gift of Dhamma to one’s children is the greatest inheritance one can give, and the Buddha himself ordained his only son Rāhula. In Buddhist countries, it is common practice for young children to ordain for a time, and thus is a very important element of the integration of Buddhist practices into Burmese life and culture. There are stories from the time of the Buddha of young children attaining Stream Entry and even Arahantship.

A famous figure in the spread of Dhamma, King Asoka, was told by elder monks that he could not consider himself a true “heir of the Sāsana” until he saw over his son’s ordination, in spite of all his previous good works. U Sarana, a Czech monk who graduated from the Buddhist and Pali University in Sri Lanka, has been in Myanmar since May 2012, and he comments on this story: “Thus the parents who allow their child to enter the community of monks become the heirs of the Buddha’s teaching, and they give one of the greatest gifts to the Saṅgha that is possible.” On the subject of children learning about the Dhamma, U Sarana goes on to say: “Little ones should never be underestimated.... Young children should be always given the opportunity to meditate, ponder on the meanings of the world and so on. If a child has a difficult question, may he ask an elder monk!”

So, what does this mean for foreign families who wish to bring children to monasteries? First, they need to be *very* clear that part of their

responsibility is to educate their children about how different cultures have different expectations and beliefs about social interactions. In particular for a monastery stay, they need to emphasize how concepts of showing respect may differ. In Myanmar, it is *much, much* more important than is typical in the West to emphasize respectful physical postures and speech when talking with elders. This is **particularly** the case at monasteries when children (and the adult yogis themselves) are interacting with senior monks. *If a family does not think it can (or does not wish to) control the behavior of their children in this regard, then the family should **not** stay at a monastery.* Additionally, families will have to accept the housing arrangements offered by the monastery, which will likely mean that partners will not be able to stay together.

There are other considerations as well. The use of hand-held electronic devices should be prohibited or strictly monitored, and children should understand that their comfort and privacy may be less than at home. They should dress and act with decorum, etc. Of course this is important even if just visiting for the day, but it is *especially* important for any overnight stay. There are a lot of restrictions to pay attention to, and behaviors to modify—and conforming to a different set of cultural norms and expectations is part of the overall cross-cultural experience, whatever one thinks of them. *First and foremost, one needs to respect the monastic environment: if one thinks one's children will not be able to behave in appropriate ways the entire time, or will be miserable in doing so, then one should **not** stay overnight at a monastery!* It is **not** the responsibility of Burmese monasteries to adapt to Western visitors and their families.

With a commitment to the above, however, a monastery stay can be a wonderful environment to teach children about the joys of offering to monks, and some kids may even begin to learn the practice of light Ānāpāna meditation.¹ One Western meditator who stayed at a monastery noted that although his children did not have a chance to learn formal meditation, they were quite impressed by the upright lives led by monks and “with their conscious way of being and genuineness.” This is exactly what many Burmese children learn by visiting monasteries, and instills one with a powerful faith in the Sangha from a very young age.

1 Many Burmese monasteries offer summer retreats that are exclusively for children, with no parents allowed. They learn about meditation, basic scripture, monastic life, etc. However, such opportunities are rarely found in English.

Some parents also choose to visit an orphanage with their kids, or may spend some time volunteering together at local schools, where children may make friends around their own age. For example, one Western family spent a day volunteering as English teachers at a monastic school, and the father noted that “it was a lovely way for [my daughter] to connect with other children, and for her to experience a school system so very different to hers here at home.”

Of course, one of the most important considerations when traveling with children beyond just monastery stays regards their health and safety. Parents should make sure to remind their children to wash their hands frequently, and to be careful around any animals (more information on confronting non-domesticated animals can be found [here](#)). Children need to understand the very different safety rules of the road in Myanmar: for example, knowing that they need to look to the right first before crossing the street, that cars *always* have the right-of-way, and how to navigate frequently cluttered sidewalks. For more on traveling with children, a recommended resource is *Lonely Planet's Travel with Children* and *Family on the Loose: The Art of Traveling with Kids*.

■ *Being Carried by a Slow Moving, Warm River*

“In late 2011, our family of four (my wife, myself and our son aged twelve and daughter aged eleven) travelled for a month in Myanmar. I had been to Burma some six years previously as a lone traveler and had enjoyed the experience immensely. I therefore knew roughly what to expect. However, both my wife and I had some anxiety about taking the children to Myanmar. This stemmed mainly from the (imagined or otherwise) risks of illness and perceived low standards of general safety. It is one thing to travel as an individual and knowingly accept some degree of risk for oneself. It is quite another to take the same responsibility for the lives of our children.

“Once in the country, we quickly relaxed. We tried to be sensible, but at the same time without being too rigid. We were careful with what we ate, but not overly so. We were somewhat careful in terms of physical safety, but once again, not overly so. For example, we often found ourselves travelling on the backs of motorbikes – a driver, a parent and a child on each – and usually without helmets.

“Once in Myanmar, we all felt safe pretty well all of the time. Years before a friend had remarked that it's best to ‘just let things flow’ when you travel in Burma. It was good advice, and we tended to do just that.

No rigid travel plans were made, just rough ones, and each day tended to shape itself. The overall feeling, when I think of it now, is similar to being gently carried in the current of a slow moving, warm river. The people and the country gave us many wonderful, heart-warming and inspiring experiences in that short month. Now having been there, not one of us would have missed the experience.

“After initially staying in a hotel for a number of nights [we moved to] a beautiful little monastery adjacent to the Irrawaddy River. It was a great opportunity to experience the day-to-day rhythm of monastic life, and also experience the deep peace and harmony that pervades the place. The monks, and interestingly, a single nun, were particularly interested in the children, and paid them a great deal of attention. We were accommodated in the monastery’s ‘visitors house’. It was really quite modern and comfortable, even having its own bathroom facilities. There was almost no English spoken at the monastery, and we had no Burmese. A monk from a neighboring monastery was a daily visitor however. He spoke reasonably fluent English, and was able to answer our many questions about monastic life.” New Zealand meditator and family

Growing Up at the Monastery

“It is quite common for children to go along with their parents to the monastery, which is usually on the outskirts of town, set in spacious grounds well shaded with trees. They can play to their heart’s content without much disturbing the monks. Monasteries are also places where children get their first religious training. They will be taught a few short prayers, to give respects to the monks and a few odd jobs in the service of the monastery like sweeping the grounds.” Khin Myo Chit, *Colorful Myanmar*



Buddhist Reflections for Parents

“What the parents give their children as a legacy will do good to them only for this life. If the parents give them the teachings of the Buddha, that will do good to them throughout all of Saṃsāra. Character building should start early in life, from childhood. You can’t learn to build good character when you are advanced in age. It’s not easy. Even though young children may not be able to understand the first characteristic of saddhā, they can perform good deeds in emulation of their elders and teachers. They can pay homage to the Three Jewels of Buddhism, offer alms, and do service to others. While doing such good deeds they enjoy the fruits of the second characteristic of saddhā, clarity of mind.” U Sarana

GAY AND LESBIAN YOGIS

In recent years, it has become more accepted for young Burmese in urban centers to “come out” as gay or lesbian, and some places in Yangon and Mandalay have become well-known locales where gays can congregate. Homosexuality has an ambiguous legal status in Myanmar, although the laws around it are rarely enforced. Gay travelers to major tourist sites will likely have little problem, as they will be interacting with people who are already familiar with Western culture. There are even gay-friendly travel agencies in Myanmar (such as www.mandalaytravel.com and www.purpledrag.com, and www.utopia-asia.com lists information on the overall gay scene in Myanmar). However, in traditional Buddhist society and in the countryside, homosexuality is not a topic openly discussed. It may even cause discomfort. Knowing all this, in sum, one should travel behaving respectfully and sensitively with regards to local sensibilities, just as a heterosexual couple should not engage in attention-grabbing PDA.

Should gay yogis “come out” to the monasteries where they are residing or practicing? This is entirely one’s own decision, and by no means something that is expected. It is a personal choice as to how one wishes to bring this into one’s monastic experience. On this point, Ma Thanegi reminds that “our meditating society is extremely conservative,” and so advises that one not “address openly or be aggressive” about any issues pertaining to sexuality. Where the concept of one’s “sexual identity” may be more understood in modern countries, this very notion may be confusing and uncomfortable to many in Myanmar, particularly in traditional communities.

An interesting, related aside is that many *nat* spirit mediums are homosexual, perhaps the one area of Burmese culture where being openly gay is accepted. As Ma Thanegi notes in *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*, “these sassy mediums say they are born to the profession, for they can dress up, dance, have fun, and be as campy as they want, applying makeup as skillfully as the best gay artistes working in expensive beauty salons.”

■ TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

While it is not uncommon to see people in public in Myanmar missing limbs or walking unsteadily with the help of younger family members, Western travelers with disabilities may have a more challenging experience than what they are used to in their home countries. Sidewalks are often uneven and broken. Crossing the street can be a frightening experience, even for the able-bodied, and many buildings have darkened concrete stairwells in the place of working (or any) elevators.

It can be helpful to get in touch with the specific monastery or meditation center one has in mind in order to inquire about their facilities. Depending on the nature of one’s disability, it is certainly possible to plan to travel around the country to some extent, especially with a companion or agency who can provide assistance.

The following are some helpful websites providing travel information for those with disabilities: www.nican.com.au (Australia), www.miusa.org (USA), www.disabilitytravel.com (USA), www.tourismforall.org.uk (UK).

■ A GROUP PILGRIMAGE

Group travel has many advantages in Myanmar. Logistically, it is beneficial as there are fewer details for any one member to figure out, and because costs are shared, they can be significantly lower. For example, in and around Mandalay and Yangon, a group can easily rent a van and driver to go from



site to site. A group can designate a leader to make their own travel arrangements, or can go with a reputed **local travel agency**.

But of course, for readers of this book, the main group travel experience is likely to be the pilgrimage, the reason why many yogis come to Burma in the first place. A meditator can certainly take a pilgrimage alone, and many do. However, a group pilgrimage is more common. In addition to the above suggestions, the following describes how to make the group pilgrimage a smoother, more rewarding experience.

If one is fortunate to have timing and other logistics work in one's favor, traveling with a Dhamma group is a wonderful way to see the sites and pay respects. This is also quite common for Burmese, who enjoy nothing better than picking up and traveling to holy places with their friends, colleagues, extended family, and neighbors. There is a Burmese proverb that goes, *amyu te si yā, amyu te su* (အမြဲတေရှိရာ အမြဲတေရာ), and can be translated as “where there are precious stones, more will become collected.” In other words, where wise or noble ones come to gather, more tend to find their way. Or, why not make meritorious and joyous deeds together! As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi says, “We Burmese believe that those who perform good deeds together will meet again through the cycle of existence, bonded by shared merit.”

Spiritually speaking, a group atmosphere can maintain the Dhamma vibrations and good intentions from morning until night, boosting up individuals when fatigue or other *kilesas* creep in during weak moments. However, when one is in the midst of a pilgrimage experience there can still be many ups and downs and challenges in spite of the Dhamma atmosphere, and for this reason it is good to set these guiding principles prior to the start. At a minimum, each group member should follow the five precepts. And if the group decides, the ground rules might be stricter; on some group pilgrimages, it has been decided that members only discuss Dhamma topics, take the eight precepts, plan all-night meditations, refrain from worldly information and external communication, etc. From the experience of many pilgrimages, it is also advisable to set and adhere to meditation times.

One of the main purposes of pilgrimage is to arouse a sense of *samvega* (urgency) for practicing Dhamma, either through one's understanding of the perils of this world or through a developing faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.

U Sarana also reminds prospective pilgrims that the commentaries speak to four kinds of clear knowledge which should be applied *before*

one takes any action, especially when doing something as valuable as going on a pilgrimage.

U Sarana more fully describes them as follows:

1. *Sâtthakasampajaññaṃ*: recognizing whether the purpose is for a skillful as opposed to unskillful reason, and to be clearly aware of why one desires to do something.
2. *Sappâyasampajaññaṃ*: considering whether the conditions under which one is going to go for pilgrimage are proper in terms of one's meditation practice and ethical determination (e.g., to offer dâna).
3. *Gocarasampajaññaṃ*: as the Buddha explained in the *Sakunagghi Sutta*, one should stay in the refuge of the four bases of mindfulness (*cattâro satipaṭṭhânâ*) and not go towards the dangerous resorts—that is, the five kinds of sensual pleasures. He goes on to say that if one deigns to indulge in sensual pleasures while on pilgrimage, one may become prey to the Tempter (*Mâra*), and either get delayed along the way or not arrive at one's planned destination at all.
4. *Asammohasampajaññaṃ*:¹ maintaining continual mindfulness.

If one is looking to join a pilgrimage already in place, or would like help in planning one for a group, refer to the sidebar on Myanmar travel companies.



1 Also understood as “wide reflection.” Different traditions may have a slightly different emphasis on the variety of objects that one can be mindful of. But overall, the Buddha teaches that it is making efforts to be continuously aware of the present moment, both in mind and in body: one is aware of one's walking, sitting, standing, and lying down. One is aware of one's breathing, eating, drinking, speaking, reading, and thinking, etc. And one is aware of one's feelings, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, bodily sensations, and thoughts, as they cause one's consciousness to arise whenever the conditions appear. Note that this is only a partial list of the meditation objects that the Buddha provided, and the full listing is much more detailed.

Pilgrimage Planning: Five M's

How do you plan a pilgrimage in the Golden Land, with so much to see? When organizing a route, the first task is to prioritize what is most important, meaning that some sacrifices must be made. Secondly, identify your limitations—that is, ensure that what you want to do most is logistically possible. *Shwe Lan* has come up with a formula called the **Five M's** to help you in your plans. By identifying your preferences on the five continuums below, the type of pilgrimage you wish to take will become clearer. The *five Ms* are: **MONEY**, **MINUTES**, **MOVEMENT**, **MAPS**, and **MEDITATION** plans.

- **MONEY:** How much are you willing or able to spend, balanced against considerations of convenience, travel speed, planning time, etc.? An example may help to clarify this dynamic. To go from Yangon to Mandalay is a twelve hour bus ride, but just four hours by plane, making the latter much faster, but also more expensive. Another cost consideration is how you reach the various sites. On one hand, a rented car and driver can take your pilgrimage group to the very doorstep of your site of choice, although this will be more costly; on the other hand, your group can brave the buses, which are much cheaper, but will take longer and complicate the logistical planning. The key is in balancing out the variety of “costs” that are inevitably a part of this endeavor, whether they be monetary, regarding physical comfort, or psychological.
- **MINUTES:** How much time do you have? What is the duration of your visa? Time, along with money, are the two overarching parameters for the other elements of your decision-making and planning.
- **MOVEMENT:** What is more important: paying respects at a *quantity* of sites, or a *quality* of experience in getting to know just a few special places? At one end of the spectrum, you may wish to visit as many places as possible—after all, this may be your only chance to do a pilgrimage in the Golden Land, and there are so many incredible possibilities! The disadvantage of such an itinerary is that you will always be on the move, meaning that there is not as much down time or extended practice periods. At the other end of the spectrum, you may choose to select one or two special sites and stay there for the entire trip. This can allow you to integrate into the local scene, learn more about Burmese Buddhist culture, and have more meditation time. The disadvantage in this case is that

you will not see as much of this amazing country. You can also negotiate a middle path, choosing to spend some days touring several important sites and other days resting at a specific monastery. Knowing that you cannot both see many, many things while also staying in a few places for a long time (unless you spend months or years in Myanmar), you have to intentionally prioritize.

- **MAPS:** Where in the country do you plan to visit? And as you attempt to answer this question geographically, First it's important to consider such variables as the season, one's meditation tradition, meditation course dates, Sayadaw schedules, etc. Next, calculate the distances, times, and costs of your itinerary, particularly if you are seeing many sites. For example, if you want to visit monasteries and pagodas in Mandalay, Ingyinbin, and Monywa, then an easy loop pilgrimage can be planned. But if you want to see sites in Myitkyina, Bagan, and Kyaiktiyo, some serious cross-country travel is involved, meaning much more in the way of expenses, travel time, and logistics.
- **MEDITATION PLANS.** To what extent do you wish to meditate intensively? For some pilgrims, this is not a prime consideration, as they intend to travel through the Golden Land with eyes open, wishing to learn as much as possible from the Buddhist life while actively engage in meritorious deeds. For others, having at minimum one or two weeks to take a meditation course is a major reason they have decided to come to Myanmar in the first place.

Ma Thanegi Goes on a Pilgrimage

Ma Thanegi writes about her own pilgrimage experience in *The Native Tourist*, noting that a local agency charged her just \$60 in 1996 for a several week tour of Burmese sites. Such tours are especially popular with those from Southern Myanmar, as many do not have extensive family and friends throughout the sites of Upper Burma. While the food provided was not entirely vegetarian, she notes that pork and beef were not served, and proper behavior was considered essential. "Myanmar travel tales are rife with stories of horrifying accidents befalling those who had scorned these rules, or had sneered at shrines," she writes. She also translates a sign that was affixed to the bus' window that read, "*Pilgrims are explicitly forbidden to wonder aloud about the ETA of any destination.*"

“The Benefits Should Not Be Overlooked.”

“To those training in morality and with devotion making efforts towards development in the Dhamma, going to Burma for a pilgrimage is very auspicious. Burma, the golden land, is a unique place, strong in purity. The benefits of going there as a part of one’s practice should not be underestimated nor overlooked. The merits gained on such a journey will last throughout one’s life and future lives. It will give a strong push of urgency to keep developing in Dhamma and dismay towards worldly things. It will bring out whatever purity one has and multiply it. Whatever negativities there may be will subside, if they arise they will not be so strong and the good atmosphere all around will settle the mind quite effortlessly. It is important that the pilgrim receives support to overcome cultural, language and religious barriers. It is easy with a Western mind to discard the many ways in which Dhamma expresses itself. Being a country of about 60 million people, Burma has its good and bad qualities as any other country. But as one decides to go on a pilgrimage and one’s mind attunes towards Dhamma, it gets connected to all the good vibrations of the golden land. There is a wide spectrum of practitioners all the way from just practicing devotion to being fully liberated. If one really makes efforts to understand and go beyond preconceived views one can fully connect to the gift which Burma is to the people of the world. The actual barriers are nothing but the five enemies, namely; craving, aversion, physical sloth/mental torpor, agitation/worry and doubt.

“Burma has enriched my life so deeply. To visit the centers of our Dhamma grandfather and great grandfather and so on, to learn about their struggles and attainments, is so satisfying. To know that there is a serious Saṅgha, that monks and nuns are practicing very diligently, gives so much faith to the heart. To just be near such noble ones, to benefit from their radiating purity is enough to dispel so much of the negativities. And to meet a people so dedicated to following the Buddha’s teaching of generosity and morality certainly inspires one to become a better person. I experienced a clarity of mind greater than ever before. Each day kept building on the previous one. We kept saying to each other, ‘how can it get any better than this?’ and those who knew better would say ‘just wait until tomorrow’ or ‘just wait until we get to such and such a place’ or ‘until we meet so and so’. Indeed, the good atmosphere kept building throughout the journey. It is difficult to put into words, it is something to be experienced. “The negativities became so feeble, an exhilarating sense of freedom

emerged. I read that the Buddha compared his feelings of relief and happiness to those of a man who has just discharged a debt, or recovered from a painful illness, or been freed from prison, or released from slavery, or who has safely crossed a dangerous wilderness. Such was the experience. I am so happy to let you know, this experience wasn't mundane, not another high to come down from. It was transformative. It is something I have brought with me home, the fruits keep on coming every day. It seems this is a new chapter. Dhamma has taken root within. Not that there are no more negativities. But it certainly has helped me get past so many obstacles that would have taken so much longer otherwise. So much misery has been dispelled. My wish of deep sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and 'come and see for yourself' (*ehipassiko*) is that all serious practitioners of Dhamma will make a pilgrimage to the Golden Land, to benefit from its good vibrations and spread this happiness of Dhamma throughout the world.

"As the great emperor Asoka inscribed on pillar edicts over two thousand years ago: 'Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to obtain without much love for the Dhamma, much self-examination, much respect, much fear (of evil), and much enthusiasm.'"

Mårten Berg, Swedish yogi who attended a pilgrimage in 2014



SAFE TRAVEL

Sayagyi U Goenka reportedly told a story he heard from his grandfather's day about a wallet that was left in a crowded marketplace in Upper Burma. For several days, it remained exactly where it had been dropped, for the honesty of the people at the time prevented them from even touching it. Although Myanmar is one of the safer countries in the world, it is still wise to take basic precautions. These include:

- Registering one's travel details and contact information electronically at one's embassy in case of an emergency.
- Keeping vital items in a money belt worn under one's clothes when in transit.
- Using a small lock to keep bags firmly shut.
- Considering the use of a small shoulder bag that can fit one's most expensive items and electronic goods.
- Not storing all one's money in one place—keep a reserve of cash for emergency purposes in a separate location.
- Keeping a flash drive with color copies and scans of important documents and other pertinent phone numbers, passwords, websites, and email addresses.
- Planning one's trip carefully—there are some rural sites in Myanmar where foreigners are not allowed, and others where hostilities may be taking place.
- Taking basic precautions to preserve one's health—make sure to also review the information in our **Health** section.

Starbucks in Sagaing

"I once stayed at a cave in a monastery in the Sagaing Hills for some time, doing my own meditation practice. I left, and returned later after an interval of a year and a half. Literally the moment I arrived, one of the monks came running over to me waving an empty tin of Starbucks candy in his hands. 'You left these last time!' he called out to me. I can't describe my feelings at this time. Carelessly, I had left this item in the cave instead of putting it in the trash, and the monk's careful Vinaya prevented him from either throwing it away or keeping it himself, since this would be 'taking what is not given', or a violation of the second precept of *Adinnadana*. So he kept this trifling tin for over a year, not knowing if I'd even return, just to preserve his stainless *sīla*. All the time I was spending silently meditating in the cave, and this single act teaches me more about the practice than anything else." Californian yogi, 2013

MAPS

If one likes maps, the best bet is the *Periplus Myanmar Travel Map* or *Nelles Myanmar*. Additional maps may be found at such online sites as www.maplink.com, www.itmb.com, and www.dpsmap.com.

Most hotels will hand out free maps, although the quality tends to be fairly basic. If one's guesthouse doesn't have them, stop by an upscale hotel and pick up a complimentary one. City Mart produces a very high quality version of the streets and places of business of Mandalay and Yangon, available in a portable 200-page book format.

Another option for the modern traveler is a standard GPS program on any mobile device. A SIM card is not necessary for it to work; simply download the maps for the area in question when in a Wi-Fi zone, and the GPS will locate one's location. These are also helpful because they include the names of streets, buildings, rivers, and other landmarks, and do so in the local language as well as English. Finally, there are many free apps that use the most modern GPS technology, *Google Maps* and *Google Earth* being the most common.

ELECTRICITY

“The plugs in Yangon are a seemingly random combination of all possible options, and a given outlet may feature interfaces for multiple plug types. A place's ‘standard’ plug conveys that context's particular history, as the most common type of plug may end up being from the country that once occupied/colonized a place, or from whom electrical goods were first imported for use there. Think of places like Myanmar that lack a standard, or, depending upon how you frame it, has many ‘standards’—how has their past dictated their present in these terms? Will a ‘standard’ emerge in Myanmar's future based upon what happens in the present?”

—Zach Hyman, American researcher in Myanmar

The current in Myanmar is 220 volts and 50 hertz. As for the types of outlets...well, Myanmar has it all: two prongs, three prongs; square, round, or slanted; thick or thin; parallel or horizontal. Many buildings employ multiple possibilities, even in the same room. The good news is that most of the time, a converter that fits two-pronged square hole sockets will work on most of these. Many visitors bring or buy different converters just in case.

Myanmar's once-unreliable power supply is steadily improving. Generally, urban areas are better supplied than rural ones, and most places that entertain foreigners (such as hotels, restaurants, and cafes) have a generator when the power goes out. The nicer places almost never experience any electrical interruptions, and may hire an entire staff solely responsible for its generator. A single industrial generator can cost as much as \$50,000, and much more to maintain. Upscale places spend even more on insulation from the very loud noises these machines emit, while those run by stall owners turn the night markets in a cacophony when the electricity goes out.

Many villages have no electricity at all and often pool resources to purchase a generator. This will then be turned on between 7-9 p.m. or thereabouts, before being turned off and conserved for use on another day. A car battery can also be used. There are even battery recharging shops with pickup and delivery service. In some places, there may be regularly scheduled power cuts known to the local residents, but at times, there is nothing regular about them and one has no way of knowing when power will come or go. The winds that come during monsoon season seem to knock power out more often—although conversely, because the Burmese power grid so depends on hydroelectric power, some say that the end of the Rainy Season brings even more intermittent service.

Electronic devices that need daily charging can be maintained if one is patient and keeps them close to an outlet. If one plans on traveling often and has a number of electronic devices (or there are many people in a group), it's worth considering the purchase of a multi-socket power board for simultaneous charging. Investing in solar or battery-operated chargers are also options.

Because of power outages, especially in rural areas, a portable light source is very helpful. This can range from a penlight or a bright cell phone to a torch/flashlight, to a simple supply of candles. In Yangon, one can also buy cheap lanterns and light cords that will illuminate

an entire room quite brightly when charged, and solar lanterns are available outside the country.

Handle With Care

Electrical outlets may not be as secure as what one is used to at home. Sometimes plugging in a device causes a spark and at other times one can actually receive a minor shock by touching any metal part of a device (e.g. computer, iPad, phone, etc.) as it is charging—this is because the outlet is not properly grounded. Some outlets have their own power switch, and when they do, it can be best to plug one's device in while the outlet is switched **off**.



LANGUAGE

BACKGROUND

While Burmese is part of the Tibe-to-Burman language group, modern Tibetan and Burmese dialects are not mutually intelligible. Burmese is a tonal language, with either three or four tones depending on the classification (sometimes characterized as high, regular, “creaky,” and a glottal stop—the latter sometimes not included as a tone). Even when identical words are pronounced in different tones, the meanings will

be entirely different. For example, *la* in a low tone means “to come,” in a high tone refers to a yes/no question marker, and in a creaky tone means “moon.”

The Burmese script was derived from the Mon and Pyu scripts in the tenth century. It is composed of thirty-three characters, and its twelve vowel sounds are made by adding symbols before, above, below, or after the consonants. For example, a full large circle above a

character indicates an /i/ sound in the creaky tone, a line under a letter that goes straight before extending perpendicular to the right makes a creaky tone /u/, and the two together make a regular tone /o/ sound.

Spaces are sometimes (but not always) used between words, although often separate clauses or phrases. There are a number of Pāli loan-words in Burmese, which are easily identifiable by the presence of “stacked” consonants, meaning two symbols are placed one above the other rather than one after the other on a line. Pāli words tend to be used for religion, government, and art-related terms, while English has come in to describe newer technology and expressions. Loan-words have also come into Burmese from Sanskrit, Chinese, and Hindi.

Handwriting is a skill widely admired in Burmese culture, and a sign of education and refinement. Many Burmese characters are based on some variation of a circle. These circular forms developed relatively recently, likely around the seventeenth century. This was when writing on palm leaves became more popular, and it is said that straight lines and hard angles caused more tears in the leaves. These days, it is a high compliment to praise someone’s script for being “very round.” The circular characters can be broken and extended in different ways depending on the sound. For example, two full circles side by side is /ht/ ¹ (∞). Other examples of this are that a full circle is /w/ sound (o), while a small opening in the left side of the circle is the number “1” (◐), and a small opening in the right is the /ng/ sound (◑).

The Burmese language itself was not standardized until after the British annexation, although Burmese Romanization has still not been standardized to this day. As a result, there are many competing phonetic systems with no clear indication or rule as to which English letters should be used to represent which Burmese sounds, and how. In the past, the standard bearer for “proper” Burmese, both spoken as well as written, came from Upper Burma and particularly wherever the current capital was located. This is true especially in the days during and just after the Royal Court, when “Palace Burmese” was still an elevated form. As years passed and the capital moved south, this dialect has essentially disappeared, and in modern times Yangon is recognized as having the standard dialect. The Burmese as spoken

1 This corresponds to an aspirated /t/ in Burmese. An aspirated consonant is when air is expelled while the sound is being produced. The convention for indicating an aspirated letter is often an “h” placed either next to the letter, or as a superscript next to the letter (dh, d^h)

by Burmese immigrants in other countries (particularly the second generation and older) has begun to differ somewhat, especially a Chinatown-Burmese dialect that incorporates some Chinese accents and words.

Mingala Ba! မင်္ဂလာပါ။

One of the first Burmese terms that many foreigners learn is “mingala ba”, and one often learns this is the equivalent of the English “hello”. *Mingala* actually means “auspiciousness,” which many yogis may quickly associate with the Mangala Sutta (pronounced “Mingala Sutta” in Burmese”), the “discourse on the blessings.” *Ba* is a command form, allowing the phrase to be literally rendered as “Have Auspiciousness,” or “may you have good fortune (many blessings) ahead.” While it can be used as a greeting, it is not said as commonly as one may say “hello” in English, there being other more widely used greetings such as the Burmese equivalents of “have you eaten yet?” or “where are you going?”

One Foreign Observer’s Take

“Burmese is one of the most unique looking written languages in the world, with lots of thinly scrawled perfect circles and squiggly appendages. I often found myself comparing it to a futuristic alien glyph. In reality, it’s an ancient text.” Daniel Isaac Combs, *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*

■ LEARNING BURMESE

Because English is only used to a limited extent in Myanmar, any progress one can make in Burmese will bring immediate dividends: even knowing a dozen Burmese words allows one to connect with Burmese monastics and meditators in ways that would not be possible otherwise. Basic conversational ability will take one even further. For those who are looking to stay in the country longer, improving one’s communicative ability can even transform one’s overall practice. Entire segments of the population (as well as countless Dhamma discourses) will become accessible, with fewer language barriers to surmount in one’s travel and interactions. And if one tries to study the Burmese script, everything from menus to bus schedules to Dhamma books may become fair game. So the question is, how easy is it to learn Burmese? There’s good news and bad news!

First, the good news: if one has some prior experience with languages, one may find that it takes a relatively short amount of time to acquire basic communication skills. Sentence structure is simple although different from the basic English subject-verb-object sentence structure: in Burmese it is (subject) object-verb, with the subject sometimes not spoken explicitly, but inferred. “I drink tea” comes out as “(I) tea drink” in Burmese, with “I” being optional. A relatively limited number of vocabulary words can be used in a variety of contexts to express a wide range of meanings, with these meanings are derived from context. An example may make this more clear. *Zay thwa dey* is a common phrase which translates literally in English as “market go”; left out are clear indications of who is involved and when the event happened, until the phrase is used contextually, in which case the meaning becomes clear. The statement could be said as one is on the way walking to the store and meets a friend, and asked where one is going, the answer means “well, I’m going to the market.” It could also be used when a husband asks his children where the wife is, and when answered with these same words, it means, “our mom went to the market.” Or, one could get into a cab and be asked one’s intended destination, and this sentence would mean “I’m going to the market,” or simply, “take me to the market.”¹ There are ample resources available for beginners, which are described below.

But then there is the hard part—although to the famed 19th century colonial administrator and author, J. George Scott, this was also the fun part as well. He was initially attracted to the Burmese language specifically because of the challenges inherent in being able to master it, and those challenges still hold true today. One issue is that the written and spoken forms are extremely different, the technical term for which is “diglossia.” As one Burmese proverb suggests, “What’s written is correct, what’s spoken is just sound” (*yay tot a hman, phat taw athan*). The oral language has continued to evolve while the written form has not, creating large differences between these two forms of the same language. Vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, and even parts of speech all differ according to whether they are written or spoken. There have been attempts over the years to alter the written language so that it better represents the spoken, but none have yet caught on. In short, what this means for the Burmese language learner is that few written texts can be used to support oral fluency, and that spoken

1 In the latter case, though, the *dey* may be changed to *mey*.

command does not automatically translate into being able to read newspapers and books.

Another difficulty is the pronunciation. In addition to having tones, there are also a number of vowel and consonant sounds with subtle distinctions for non-Burmese ears, and these take time to discriminate, learn, and perfect. It's important to either work with a native Burmese speaker or use audio support when one is just starting out, otherwise one may be practicing the wrong sounds from the get-go.

A third challenge is the available resources for learners progressing beyond the beginning levels of the language. As one American Center teacher commented, "I've mastered all the grammar forms I learned from my books and tutors. But all the time, in casual interactions, people say things using words I understand, but the grammatical functions in how they are being used are new. It sometimes takes me hours just to identify them and ask for explanations... and then I have to figure out how to even use them. Unfortunately, there are not many good resources when you get to intermediate level, especially if you don't want to attend an academic college course but just want to be more proficient in speaking. If I were studying a language like French or Arabic or even Thai or Turkish, there would be many resources for all these grammar points. I could just study the rule, memorize it, and try to use it. But for Burmese, it's a DIY adventure. Kind of like the country itself, I guess."

The final challenge has to do with how to study its written form. As stated earlier, because oral language does not reinforce the written script, it becomes a whole study in itself to master Burmese writing. And opting to write Burmese in Romanized transliteration poses additional problems. Sometimes even Burmese people aren't sure which word is meant by a given transliteration, given that there is no standardization, and correct pronunciation is nearly impossible with Romanization. So even if one plans a short trip to Myanmar or is involved in a Burmese Buddhist community in one's local area, it would probably be worth the time to learn the Burmese script simultaneously with spoken Burmese. More about the transliteration system used in *Shwe Lan* can be found [here](#).

Bringing some language resources while traveling is highly recommended. Many standard guidebooks have a small glossary in the back, and *Lonely Planet* also produces its own pocket Burmese phrasebook that is quite good. Once in Yangon, one can find reprints of many of these. There are also local books written for Burmese studying English,

but these can be easily reversed for the opposite benefit. Commonly-used phrase books include *Practical Myanmar* by SUN Associates, *Burmese Phrase Book* by David Bradley, and *Spoken Myanmar* by U Tint Winn Naing. *Shwe Lan* plans to include several particularly useful words and terms for yogis in the Glossary.

If you want to begin a more serious self-study of Burmese that goes beyond learning key phrases, the best is John Okell's four-book series. It is recommended to start Books I and III simultaneously. Book I deals with basic Burmese grammar and words, and Book III patiently introduces the script and pronunciation, so they complement one another well. Some of Okell's other books have also been made freely available for download, including *Burmese by Ear* (also called *Essential Myanmar*), which has audio files that accompany the workbook. Gene Mesher's *Burmese For Beginners* is also good, although it is more advanced than the title indicates. An Internet search can find the long PDF version of "Burmese Familiarization Course" that can be downloaded freely and is another introduction to the language. Other beginner options include *L-Lingo Burmese* and *Easy Burmese*.

If one is ready to progress beyond these good beginner texts, unfortunately, there are a lack of resources for the intermediate and advanced Burmese language student. Some Burmese language learners have purchased novels that feature English on one side of the page and Burmese on their other, allowing them to check comprehension of grammar and words. Others have tried to plan a total immersion experience at a monastery or hire a tutor.

Surprisingly enough, in Myanmar itself there are few language classes to speak of. As of this edition, opportunities for classes include **Alliance Française** (01-536900, 537122; rmlormel@ifb.net.mm), **Linking Hands** (01-552531, 0973180428; language@linking-hands.net), **Daw Phyu Phyu Win** (095046431; nyalinphyu@gmail.com), and **The First Myanmar Language Learning Center** (0973031467, 0949230204, 01-538579, 513752; myanmarsarmyanmarmsaga@gmail.com). Additionally, the second floor of the café **Pansodan Scene** (144 Pansodan Road, corner of Pansodan and Maha Bandoola, 0973170503) hosts a "Burmese language club" with study materials. The **University of Foreign Languages** (01-35985, 513193, 530443, 531985; rose.91264@gmail.com) also has its own study program.

For those looking to study Burmese language more intensively prior (or following) a visit, John Okell offers regularly scheduled intensive courses in Yangon, Chiang Mai, London, and Barcelona, and SEASSI

(www.seassi.wisc.edu) holds a four week intensive course in Madison, Wisconsin. Other noted programs can be found at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Cornell University, INALCO, and ANU.

Burmese tutors are available, many of whom have past experience with diplomats and scholars. Their rates are usually set at \$10 per hour for the more experienced tutors, and can be less for newer ones. Here is a partial list of some well-known tutors in Yangon:

- Professor Dr. Daw Cho Cho Aung: profdr.cho@gmail.com
- Htoo Htoo Khant: htoohtoo.khant3@gmail.com
- Khaing Khaing Lwin: 01-392709, jennifer@mptmail.net.mm
- Mar Lay: 01-548753
- Maw Maw Thin: 01-522579
- May Phyo Khaing: 09 7320 8535, myaukkalay@gmail.com
- Mie Mie: mmyatkhaing@gmail.com
- Moe Pwint: 01-537803, 094 2116 3463 rainymoe85@gmail.com
- Dr. Nang Moe Pwint Chit 09 4316 8422, moe@moemyanmar.com, www.moemyanmar.com
- Mya Hla: 094 5000 5693, umyahla2004@gmail.com
- Pa Pa Khine: 09 517 9895, 09 7320 2808, ppkhine1@gmail.com
- Sally San Yu Wai Maing: 01-535328, sanyuwaimaung@gmail.com
- Waddi Thwin: 01-513196, 635021.
- Yi Yi Win: 01-663691, mamaqueen@gmail.com
- Yu Yu Khaing: 01-217261, khaing.yuyu@gmail.com
- Than Nu: 09 200 1402
- Naing Tun Lin: 01-34446, 60651, 60857
- P Allen Nalin: 094 0152 6105, p.allenNalin@gmail.com
- Zar Chi Aung 09 7309 2791, zcaungmimi@gmail.com (Mandalay)

The following teachers can be found in Thailand:

- Ubonrat Puntumin: +66 (0) 53 943246, upantumin@yahoo.com, (overseas Burmese courses at Chiang Mai University)
- Yamin Shwe Zin Htaik: 083 566 5761, yshwesinhtaik@gmail.com (Chiang Mai)
- Nila: nilarma@yahoo.com (Bangkok)
- Wirat and Oranut Niyomtam: +66 (0) 55 261000-4 ext. 1150, msep@nu.ac.th (Phitsanulok)
- Daw Thein Thein Win: 08 7978 4795, theinthein06@gmail.com (Mahasarakham)
- Soe Nay Lynn: soethit045@gmail.com, (Mae Sot)

One might also consider an online tutor. One option for this is *Glovico.org*, which describes itself as a “free trade tutoring service” that seeks to empower language tutors from developing countries—Burmese teachers are available as of this printing. There are other sites that offer “language exchanges” in which you can find a volunteer who can assist you. Other options include software programs and dictionaries¹ that can be downloaded (some for free and some not), YouTube and other recorded lessons, and websites with online tutorials and comprehension tests. Concerning the latter, Northern Illinois University has a good set of lessons at www.seasite.niu.edu/Burmese and Cornell offers a nice introduction to the script and sound here: <http://lrc.cornell.edu/asian/courses/bu/materials/scriptanime>. “Daily Burmese” gives frequent lessons at www.facebook.com/groups/daily.burmese, and free online lessons are available here as well: www.asiapearltravels.com/language/intro_burmese.php

Useful online dictionaries include:

- www.sealang.net/burmese/dictionary.htm
- <http://my.wiktionary.org/wiki/>
- www.saingdictionary.net/2009/03/blog-post_2158.html
- www.burmese-dictionary.org
- www.dhammadana.org/book/dbf.pdf
- www.birmanisch-deutsch.de/search.php
- www.lexilogos.com/english/burmese_dictionary.htm

Finally, for a good recap of the available resources, take a look at www.facebook.com/groups/BurmeseMyanmarLanguageLearning

Computerized Burmese

In this age of apps and online resources, travelers to Myanmar have advantages that those even five years ago did not. If you have an iPhone, check out *iBurmese*, *Yangon Taxi Translator*, and *Mingalaba*. Additionally, *Learn Myanmar* is a phrasebook, and *Mogok Browser* allows one to read webpages and type in Burmese script. There are many choices for Android as well, and new products will surely be coming out after this version of *Shwe Lan* is released. With the

1 A particularly helpful—and free!—one is “Burmese/Myanmar-English-Czech Students’ Dictionary,” prepared by U Sarana: <https://archive.org/details/MyanmarBurmese-English-CzechStudentsDictionarywithContents>.

right technical know-how, it's possible to download a Burmese font system to use on one's phone when chatting with friends; most phone shops in Myanmar can do this for a small fee. Also quite helpful are online Burmese-English dictionaries. While these may be incomprehensible to most foreign yogis (since they use the Burmese characters), one can simply point to a definition and your Burmese friends can understand.

A Tough Language

How hard is Burmese? In his 1897 novel *On the Irrawaddy*, George Henty had a character proclaim: "It is rather a tough language to master," Stanley replied. "It gave me more trouble than the four or five Indian languages I speak." U Sarana studies Burmese well over a century later, and he agrees. The maker of a comprehensive Burmese multilingual dictionary concludes: "Yes, Burmese is very different from Western languages. I myself studied 16 languages during this short life, and find Burmese the most difficult of all of them."

MONASTIC BURMESE



Language Study

"It's completely new for me to learn Myanmar language. I went alone around Yangon without knowing the Myanmar language but due to the kindness of people I had never faced any trouble. [After starting my study] I didn't hesitate to talk, whether I made mistakes

or not. During my conversations, local people helped to correct my mistakes, which was really helpful for me. I am really grateful to all the novices, monks, students, and lay people. I believe it is within the confines of everybody to learn a second language effectively." Venerable Ariyajoti, Bangladeshi monk

Beyond everyday Burmese, the language of monks and at monasteries requires an entirely different set of grammar and vocabulary. This even includes differences for such basic words as *I*, *you*, *years*,

give, eat, etc. For example *chunaw* and *chama* are the male and female versions of “I”, respectively. However, when speaking to a monk (or when a monk himself is speaking), one must say *debeedaw*. There are different vocabulary terms when speaking to monastics; for example, it is not said that a monk has “died,” but, literally, that he “flew away” (which is sometimes rendered to the English “returned”). Similarly, a monk “proceeds” rather than “walks,” and instead of “sleeping” is said to be in a “state of repose.” When clarifying what a monk has said, one never says simply “what?”, but uses “*shin?*”, which can be translated as “sir?” or “lord?” Your Burmese hosts will likely be very forgiving when you use a lay word out of ignorance when speaking to monks, but it’s good to try to speak appropriately to monks to the degree that one is able. For more information on specific language points pertaining to religious situations you can refer to our upcoming glossary.

Monastic speech in English is evolving as well. For example, it is seen as more polite to “offer” something to a monk than to “give,” and to ask where a monk “resides” rather than where he “lives” (although this may be more relevant when speaking to monks who are fluent in English and can recognize such subtleties). At this point, however, “monk English” is not as standardized as Burmese—after all, monastic Burmese has had a head start of nearly a millennium in perfecting the language system for use in monastic culture.

Within the order itself, a monk becoming ordained is translated as him “entering the Sāsana” (သာသနာဘောင်သို့ ဝင်သည်, *tā ta nā bau~tō. we~tī*), or “going into the wilderness” (တောထွက်သည်, *to thwě. tī*), meaning he is now known as one of “Buddha’s sons” (ဘုရား သားတော်, *phā yā: tā: tō*), for he has formally “left behind human society” (လူဘောင်မှ ထွက်သည်, *lū bhau~hma thwe. tī*). In older times especially, a large variety of religious linguistic expressions were not used when referring to lay people. It was even debated whether such terms could be applied to nuns (for there was no bhikkhuni order following the full precepts) or non-ordained hermits who followed different vows of renunciation. In these cases, the critical question was who could consider themselves to be “inside” the Buddha Sāsana. In more recent times, some have been heard using formerly monastic-only terms when describing lay yogis entering retreat at a meditation center, as U Ko Lay famously employed when describing non-Buddhist foreigners at IMC. While such terms have been heard being used by one who

practices Vipassanā (as opposed to those practicing only dāna, sīla, and samādhi), using such language in public can still be controversial today. The same holds true for using verbs reserved for monks (such as different forms of “eat” or honorific forms of address), although some Burmese lay practitioners do so from time to time.

Different Ways of Counting

An American yogi visiting the Sagaing Hills in 2011 shares this interesting story: “I remember this time I was at a small monastery, and I asked someone how many people (ယောက်, *yau*) were sleeping there that night. She answered only seven. I was quite confused, because I knew there were way more. I kept asking and kept getting the same answer. Finally she said, ‘well, there are seven people (*yau*) and eight monks (ပံး, *pā:*).’ I knew that grammatically speaking, *yau* referred to ‘people’ while *pā:* referred to ‘monks.’ What I didn’t understand until that day was the cultural implications of that linguistic rule. This was actually a very significant moment for me in understanding, from a Burmese Buddhist perspective, the extent to which monks and the Saṅgha were held separate from the affairs of the rest of us worldlings.”

A Czech monk who is fluent in Burmese has this to say: “Imagine asking how many cats are in a house, and then when you get the number, suddenly you say you also wanted to know how many dogs were there as well! Instead ask ‘how many dogs and cats are in the house altogether?’”

A historical perspective illuminates this issue through a different lens. During much of the time of the Burmese kings, there were two basic classes: the rulers and the ruled. The latter group was then subdivided into three further groups of royal servicemen, freeman, and slaves. Monks were totally outside all of these divisions, and anyone from any class could ordain (although during some periods permission had to be sought by an authority). Even during periods of great instability, the role of the monk was respected. Thus, one may see how language came to similarly reflect how removed monks were seen from the duties of men. However, in recent years, and with the growth of lay meditation, some changes may be seen even linguistically. As an example, Houtman quotes a yogi at Maha Bodhi center in Mandalay who tried to employ the counter, *ba*, when referring to lay meditators, before being corrected by the Sayadaw that this was not appropriate.

“*Saṅgha Talk*”

One of the more unique ESL textbooks to be found is called “*Saṅgha Talk*,” a Taiwanese based project by Stephen Powell and Huang Pao-Ling. This English learning textbook is entirely oriented towards Buddhist monks who wish to use English in order to discuss the Buddha’s teachings with foreign meditators. All the grammar, vocabulary, context, and chapters relate directly to the communicative needs of monks. Furthermore, the typical topics one finds in most English language learning textbooks (such as speaking about one’s hobbies or what to order in a restaurant) are not included, since monks would have little need of such exercises. *Saṅgha Talk* can be found on the Internet, and may make a thoughtful offering to members of the Burmese Saṅgha, opening future gateways of Dhammic communication.



ENGLISH USAGE

A common question from foreign yogis is what to expect in the way of English communication with Burmese lay and monastics. The short answer is that some monks or meditation teachers may speak very rudimentary English, and translators can usually be found for more complicated issues—although not always at the very moment they are needed. However, as one stays longer, proper communication will help bring about a greater understanding of the practice that, simply

put, is not possible without a degree of fluency in a common language. *Because so few Burmese speak fluent English, this means that for those interested in staying for an extended period in the country, study and proficiency of the Burmese language becomes increasingly important.* This not only allows one to have deeper friendships and more easily arrange logistical issues, but one can also engage in the real nuances of the practice. Although the experience of simply being around a highly developed being may transcend language, adding proficient verbal communication will only increase and enhance such learning opportunities.

English tends to be spoken more widely in urban than in rural areas of Myanmar, and more by the upper and middle class than the poor. This is similar to what one would find in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, but there is one additional feature that makes Myanmar somewhat unique. That is, many members of the older generation speak impeccable English, educated as they were at the American and British missionary schools that had been prevalent in Myanmar before being nationalized in 1965. While English had been taught in schools from kindergarten on, it was taken out of the curriculum, and was later brought back initially from Grade 5. The combination of no more missionary schools and fewer years of English in school has resulted in fewer Burmese speaking it well.

However, there is a great interest among Burmese today in learning English, particularly the younger generations, because it is seen to benefit one's career and study. Many accomplished Burmese speakers of English offer what are called "private tuitions" (or lessons) in their home to neighborhood kids as a way to supplement their income. Most bookstores have a wide array of English learning materials available, and these make good gifts to Burmese acquaintances. And many folks you will meet—including monks and novices—will be very happy to have the opportunity to practice their English with you.

As the country was a British colony for over half a century, a number of English nouns and verbs have been absorbed into Burmese. For example, "car" is *kaa*, and "to retire" is *pinsin yu deh*, meaning "to take pension." Some other interesting Burglish terms are *sapling* (spelling) and *doutar* (daughter), *than choo* (thank you) and the great *kiss me* (excuse me). Affectionately known as "Burglish," Burmese English can be difficult to comprehend for native English speakers for several reasons. First, Burmese tones make it challenging for Burmese to place the appropriate stress at the word or sentence level.

Additionally, pronunciation in Burghish affects the production of many ending sounds, either extending them nasally or cutting them off abruptly with a glottal stop. Finally, there is no Burmese equivalent for some letters, such as /v/ /r/ /f/; for example, /v/ is usually articulated as a /b/ or /p/ sound, /y/ is substituted for /r/, and the /f/ sound is produced as an aspirated /p/.

VOLUNTEERING & DONATIONS

Myanmar is very much a giving culture—not just in the amount and regularity that people give, or by the fact that those with very little give very much—but even more so, in the sheer joy that the giver clearly experiences from the simple act of giving. Sometimes seeing this, in itself, has inspired yogis to find more ways to give themselves. One easy way to get in the habit of giving is by keeping a bag of loose items that can be offered anytime one feels the volition. One can do so with anything from candy to school supplies to fruit, especially to children. Keep in mind, however, that one may not wish to give them on those rare occasions when they are requested, because this runs counter to the true culture of generosity in Burma, as well as to the whole purpose of true *dāna* on the part of the giver. The giving of *dāna* by foreign yogis in Myanmar should not be done in such a way as to encourage a culture of begging in Burmese society!

Many foreign meditators feel so much gratitude and joy that they are eager to find even bigger ways of giving back. One of the best ways to do that is taking advantage of the many opportunities for volunteer service in the country. In addition to the recommendations found in *Shwe Lan*, yogis are encouraged to ask their Burmese friends and at monasteries where they stay.

It is important to clarify that there are very specific rules that yogis should understand when offering *dāna* at monasteries; for more information on these procedures and protocols, see Chapter 7. If a particular monastery provides free education, medical services, water, or some other need to its community, one can certainly request that one's donation go towards this purpose, and can also volunteer one's effort and time as well. On a similar note, a donation can be made to a local mosque, pagoda, or church to support their role in community services. Giving in this way will ensure that one's donation will be given in a culturally appropriate way, and will not encourage a culture of begging.

Past foreign yogis have given time to share their specialty, profession, skill, or hobby. Workshops and lectures have been delivered by yogis in such diverse fields as English Teaching, Chinese Medicine, Anthropology, Nature Hikes, Child Development, Children Meditation Courses, Teacher Training, Music, Cross-Cultural Communication, AIDS/HIV, and more. While some yogis may have just a day or a few hours available, others come (and then return) primarily for this giving opportunity, and have stayed for months or even longer for this reason alone.

Many foreign meditators are interested in knowing reputable organizations that are doing good work within Myanmar, so that they can be assured that their donation is effective. In each regional section, we provide information of local Burmese organizations—many of them run by serious meditators—that are actively engaged in making their community a better place. *Shwe Lan* does not list any large international organizations, since such donations are often dissipated in logistics, bureaucracies, salaries, promotions, and various overhead costs before they actually reach the community in need. Some of the contacts listed in this guide are so local that they can only accept donations given in person, and it is common for yogis to ask visiting friends to give donations on their behalf. Most importantly about the recommended organizations in *Shwe Lan* is that they use every *kyat* directly for the purpose of the service their organization performs. These individuals are highly respected in their local neighborhoods, and have gained much trust from their peers.

Note that in addition to giving cash or materials, many local organizations may welcome foreign yogis to observe or assist in their volunteer activities, or to visit their grounds. Information concerning more formal opportunities for service, including paid positions and internships, can be found at www.ngoinmyanmar.org.

A Family Lesson

“My wife is a school teacher in our home country of New Zealand. While traveling in Myanmar with our family of four, she was therefore naturally curious about education in the country and had a desire to visit a school there. While visiting a monastery in the Sagaing Hills, we mentioned this to a new-found meditator friend. He knew of a small monastic school nearby and before we knew it we were making our way along a shady forest path for a visit to the International Buddhist Education Center (or IBEC).

“At one point we were encouraged to participate in helping with English language lessons, and that was how we spent the balance of the day. Not knowing quite how to begin teaching, and initially feeling a bit blank, our eleven-year-old daughter came up with the idea of getting the class to write a story starting with a seed of three simple words: boy, football and river. A Grade nine class gave suggestions, as a group crafted the following story which we wrote on a blackboard:

“One hot day, a boy was walking in the street. He stopped to buy a snack. Then he went to the pagoda to meditate. Next he visited a friend and they played football. They walked to the Ayeyarwaddy River for a swim.”

“At 3:30 p.m. school ended for the day. All of the children came into the main hall to pay respects to the Buddha before going home. It was a heartwarming end to a lovely day that gave us some small taste of how rewarding volunteering in a Myanmar school could be. One day we hope to visit again and help on a longer term basis.” New Zealand meditator and family.

Eager Learners

“I’ve worked and volunteered in many countries around the world, but I’ve never seen a more receptive, eager, and grateful group of participants than those I found in Burma. Period. End of story. I went in only planning to do a small session, but their energy blew me away, and I ended up digging deeper and trying to give more. It was one of the most memorable experiences I had in the country.” California yogi and teacher, 2008

No Need to Leave the Monastery

Some yogis are interested in volunteering but don’t want to leave the friendly confines of their monastery or meditation center even for a minute. No worries! Many of these sites provide a number of social services for their community, including a need for tutors, and this would be as good a staging ground as any for service. Whether one is hoping to give English lessons or train young doctors, monasteries and the like can provide materials and arrange facilities. Inform a local monk or caretaker about one’s intent and one will likely be able to “work from home!”







CHAPTER 3

HEALTH



ကျန်းမာမှ ချမ်းသာ။
ca~: mā hma, cha~: thā

“If health, then happiness.”

Remove the cause and the patient is cured. So the Buddha, “in the same way, realised that the whole universe is suffering; that the cause of suffering is craving. He said, ‘Remove the cause and the effect will automatically disappear.’ And then he showed how to destroy craving by walking on the Noble Eightfold Path. He gave the finest prescription the world has ever seen... It is a practical doctrine and we must walk on the Path and not merely admire the Path. If the patient merely admires a bottle of medicine—Quinine mixture—he will never get cured. He should gulp it down. I have never seen anybody admiring quinine mixture, but nevertheless, simply looking at the bottle, admiring the label, or anything else will not cure the patient. He has to drink it; then he will get cured: whether he admires or he does not admire makes no difference. The chief thing is to gulp it down, then only will the medicine work. So we must walk on the path. By walking on the path one will attain peace.”

—U Lawkanatha, Italian monk,
in a talk delivered at Rangoon University



A person in a dark, flowing garment is walking across a rustic wooden bridge. The bridge is made of vertical posts and horizontal beams, situated over a body of water. The scene is captured at sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden-orange glow in the sky and water. The person's silhouette is dark against the bright background.

HEALTH

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INTRODUCTION

So much rests on health! For the yogi with just three weeks of vacation time hoping to pilgrimage to the sacred sites, or the monastic aspirant with a deep desire to spend years in robes, or the meditator planning a several-month stay at a local monastery to study scriptures and Pāḷi—so much rests on health. By respecting the body’s limitations and honoring its needs, one can protect this most important vehicle that is the engine for all further Dhamma practice and the deeper exploration of the Golden Land’s riches.

At the same time, yogis should keep in mind that becoming ill does not necessarily have to be a distraction that takes one away from “the practice.” Learning about the Dhamma presents an opportunity to discover the deeper connections between body and mind. Meditators observe with wisdom and equanimity the pleasant as well as unpleasant experiences, all the while loosening the bonds of attachment and self-identification. Most visitors to Myanmar can certainly expect to have days where their health is on the mend—maybe nursing an upset tummy, becoming dehydrated, a general lack of energy or some other ailment. The balancing work of the yogi is to find how one can maintain an active schedule without overdoing it, and above all, how to take precautions to safeguard one’s health, while continuing the work of mindfulness through all the transitory states that mind and body will encompass.

The Buddha fully recognized the benefits of good health in walking the Path. Indeed, he lists health as one of the five “favorable occasions for striving” alongside youth, having enough food, peace in society, and peace among monks. Specifically, a monk is in good physical condition for striving when he “is seldom ill or afflicted, possessing an even digestion that is neither too cool nor too hot but moderate.” On the other hand, the Buddha warned that yogis should not allow any periods of ill health to have an outsized effect on their practice. In the Dīgha Nikāya, he describes a person who “is recuperating, having not long recovered from an illness, and he thinks: ‘My body is weak and useless. I’ll have a rest.’ So he lies down and does not stir up enough energy to complete the uncompleted, to accomplish the unaccomplished, to realise the unrealised.” Health is referenced in numerous other places in the Tipitaka, addressing topics ranging from

the health benefits of walking meditation and eating rice porridge, to the advantages of using toothpicks and “periodic wandering.” It is clear the Buddha felt that in seeking Nibbana, strength and balance were important physically as well as mentally. In this same spirit, yogis who come to Myanmar should also be mindful of their health, and the possible health challenges that they may encounter in the course of their stay in the Golden Land.

Readers please note: Shwe Lan is not qualified to provide medical advice. The information provided in this chapter is presented for your consideration only. Each individual must make their own independent choices regarding Health, and certainly should ensure that any specific medical choices are sanctioned by his or her physician.

OVERVIEW

The health sector has not been immune from the dramatic changes that have been sweeping across Myanmar over the past few years. Various government reforms to medical services are underway, although at present this has been occurring more in Yangon and other major population centers than in the rural countryside. The rapid rate of change may even make some information in this section outdated by the time one arrives in country. If one is ever in need of medical care while in Myanmar, *Shwe Lan* recommends that the first step is asking a local acquaintance or friend for the most up-to-date information.

But even as the health system modernizes, it is important to keep in mind that Myanmar is still a developing country with limited medical facilities. Even the health care options available in larger cities may seem basic for visitors from more industrialized nations, though private clinics and hospitals tend to offer more services and have better equipment than government-run options. *Generally speaking, travelers who incur serious illness or injury while in Myanmar may want to seek care in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, all of which are only short flights away.*

The following are some health facts about Myanmar from the World Health Organization.¹ To better understand these through comparison, U.S. numbers have been placed in parentheses:

¹ Cited on the World Health Organization website in 2015.

- Present life expectancy (in years) at birth: men 64, women 68 (76, 81)
- Deaths under age 5 per 1,000 live births: 62 (8)
- Deaths between age 15 and 60 per 1,000 population: men 242, women 184 (130, 77)
- Health spending per capita (figures in US dollars): 25 (8,895)
- Health spending as % of GDP: 1.8 (17.9)

An anecdotal comparison may be relevant to meditators: those yogis who have also taken Dhamma trips in India have reported fewer health challenges in Myanmar.

Yogis on prescription drugs are strongly encouraged to come stocked with an ample supply of any vital medication. Many common drugs can be found in Myanmar, but as counterfeit products are a real concern (for both standard medication as well as traditional forms of medicine), the foreign yogi should take care. Some travelers come with their own small first-aid/medicine kit and an extra stash of medication for emergencies. This is especially recommended for those planning to visit rural areas or stay at remote monasteries, as the countryside offers little in the way of modern medical care.

Alternative health care options are also available in Myanmar. For example, the country has its own form of traditional medicine. And due to its proximity to China, as well as being home to a large Chinese community, practitioners of acupuncture and Chinese-style herbal medicine can also be found. Spas and massage parlors are in the cities and larger towns, although these are not as commonly available as one would find in neighboring Thailand.



“How Do You Do?”

Meeting someone for the first time in a new culture may involve a different set of getting-to-know-you questions. For example, in some countries it is common to ask directly about age and income level, questions usually considered to be intrusive in the West. In Myanmar, one question that has surprised some foreign visitors is, “Are both your parents still alive?” Some yogis have wondered about its underlying meaning. This question stems from the responsibility the Burmese feel about caring for their parents in old age (and they may genuinely wonder how a Western yogi is managing this responsibility while living in such a distant country). It also reflects the reality of the aforementioned WHO statistics, in that the odds are simply greater that a Burmese will lose at least one parent earlier in life than those living in developed countries.

Infant Mortality

Statistics also show that low-income Burmese parents are more likely to lose a child during their lifetime than their counterparts in the U.S. or Europe. One proverb speaks to this—*shayā myā; tā: te* (ဆရာများ သားသေ). Translated, it means, “Although many doctors came, still the child died.” A Burmese equivalent of “too many cooks spoil the broth,” it is used when too much advice is eventually for naught, and commonly used in a joking fashion when too many people are concerned over what one feels is a trifling matter. While many foreign yogis may have a visceral reaction to hearing the notion of infant mortality in a joking manner, this saying illustrates different cultures’ understanding of and relationship to regard death.

HEALTH AND RENUNCIATION

Health issues can take a different form for committed monastics than for lay visitors coming for brief visits. Foreign monastics often stay in more secluded, rural regions, and are not able to acquire and take food and medicine as freely as meditators. Three foreign monastics share their experiences below.

Bhikkhu Agga, a Dutch monk who lived deep in the forest for one year, commented: “For any long-term stay in Myanmar, but maybe in particular when you are a monk, being in the hands of a much lower medical standard might be one of the bigger things one surrenders or renounces in the holy life. Depending on the place, one encounters a wide range of medical support—from a village doctor to local military hospitals, from free clinics and hospitals for monks to private clinics in

the big cities. Sometimes you have to be happy with just getting some Burmese medicine when your health is declining, or, if you are lucky, you might find help from a foreign doctor who has come to make merit.”

An American monk also noted this quality of renunciation, commenting, “As a traveler, I had money and I could be back home in a flash if I wanted. As a bhikkhu, I don’t have this option and I’m left at the mercy of the local medical [institution, which operates] the monastery clinic twice a week.” The monk also added that he believed when one is faced with such problems as stomach pains or tropical diseases such as malaria, one may be better off with local medical facilities that are used to seeing these types of health issues.

Finally, a German nun, Sayalay Anopama, describes her own health challenges and insights: “The past year has been a big learning curve for me, to be continued this year. Two weeks after my ordination, the night before I intended to start an intensive meditation retreat in silence for three months, I got sick with an infection which brought on a recurrence of the stomach problem I had suffered during the months before, and remained for most of the year, including a fall causing me three broken ribs, which forced me to come to a complete stop as I had been still running to ‘fight’ the stomach sickness rather than making friends with it, realizing that ultimately we are not in control of our bodies and nature. In the end, the fall turned out to be a good thing as my stomach healed very soon [after] being ‘immobilized,’ also with the help of some dear friends who sent me some advice and medicine and the kindness and support by my fellow sisters at the monastery. My health conditions and the way to deal with them have taught me a lot, being ill as a newly ordained nun, fully depending on the help and goodwill of others, in a country and culture which are still new to me – not always easy but the lessons learnt will help me in the future. The most important thing I learnt was to ‘accept’ that things don’t go my way and that everything can happen any moment, facing my fears.”

The Immortal Medicine

“When you are practicing Vipassanā meditation, it is the same as if you are drinking the immortal medicine; and when you are reciting the Discourse on Dependent Origination, it is the same as, you are using the immortal medicine as ointment. You may employ it in two ways in order to wear the poisons off. Consequently, you would gradually escape from death.” Bhaddanta Saddhamma Kittisara, *Buddha’s Way of Immortal Medicine*

PREPARING FOR THE TRIP

This section describes a wide range of health issues that one may wish to consider prior to leaving for Myanmar. While the list of potential health-related issues outlined below may seem scary, it is not to suggest that every traveler will get every ailment—far from it! Moreover, following the preventative and responsive measures outlined in this chapter can go a long way towards helping yogis avoid any major health problems while in the Golden Land. And, it's always better to be safe than sorry.



Vaccines

The decision to be vaccinated is automatic for some people, and out of the question for others. Below are listed the vaccines recommended for travelers to Myanmar by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and individual yogis can make their own decisions accordingly. The CDC recommends:

- tetanus-diphtheria
- hepatitis A
- hepatitis B
- typhoid
- Japanese encephalitis
- rabies

More information can be found on the CDC Myanmar page:
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/burma.htm>





Preparing Your Medicine Kit

ဆေးကောင်း၊ သန့်ခေါင်း။

shē: kau~, ta~: khau~

“If the medicine is good, an amount as small as the head of a hair-louse can cure.”

“Now, you should understand that you have used the wrong medicine throughout the cycle of rebirths.

As you have already known, dependent on ignorance arise kammic formations; and because of kammic formation arises rebirth consciousness. Because of using the wrong medicine, i.e. the origin of suffering of the past, you get the five aggregates i.e. suffering in this existence. Because of the five aggregates you must die again.”

—Bhaddanta Saddhamma Kittisara,
Buddha’s Way of Immortal Medicine

While “Right Medicine” is not one of the factors of the Eight-Fold Noble Path, having quick access to the right medicine can be the difference between a comfortable, full trip to Myanmar, or an uncomfortable, perhaps artificially shortened one. Some people like to be prepared for any contingency, while others prefer to travel light and deal with life as it comes. Some prefer Western medicine, while others lean towards herbal remedies. Whatever one’s particular style, this section lists health-related items that past meditators have found helpful.

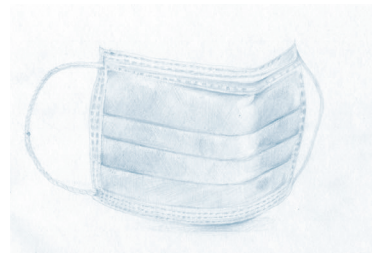
- **Prescription drugs**
- **Supplements, herbs, over the counter drugs**
 - As with prescription medication, yogis are advised to bring sufficient amounts of any items they take on a regular basis.
- **Oral re-hydration powder or salts** - Dehydration is one of the most common health issues travelers face in Southeast Asia, especially for those coming from more temperate climates. In a pinch, any sugary drink will do, but powders that include electrolytes such as Emergen-C or Gatorade are more effective. Local brands are widely available as well.



- **Anti-diarrhea medication** – It might be wise to pack pills containing loperamide. Although loperamide-based drugs only stop the symptoms without addressing the underlying cause, it will still make that six-hour bus ride *much* more bearable. Herbal or chemical antibiotics are sometimes needed to resolve the root infection.
- **Pain relief medication** – There are a wide variety of natural and chemical options for relieving pain, and with mindful equanimity and wise observation also not to be forgotten! Some yogis choose to carry a small bottle of an NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as Advil or Aleve for times when quick relief is needed, such as when in transit. NSAID drugs are mainly anti-inflammatory and anti-fever, so will not be effective for pain due to other causes.
- **Anti-fever/inflammatory medication** - The most convenient medication to bring for fever is a bottle of NSAIDs, as these drugs can also treat many types of pain and inflammation, in addition to fevers. (If the cause is a bacterial or viral infection, NSAID drugs will not kill the microbes, just attenuate fever and pain.)
- **Anti-histamines** – People with allergies often use anti-histamines, but since these drugs can also bring relief from bug bites and other swelling reactions (common in a tropical country, and more so in rural monasteries), they might be useful for travelers in general, as one comes into contact with many unfamiliar substances and insects while traveling in a foreign land.
- **Antibiotics** – Travelers with plans to spend extended periods in rural areas should think seriously about bringing a supply of antibiotics for emergencies. In most countries, a prescription from a doctor is necessary to obtain strong antibiotics like ciprofloxacin or doxycycline (note, however, that in Myanmar antibiotics are often sold over the counter and may be different brands than Western yogis are used to). A topical antiseptic for cuts, burns or minor eye infections is also a worthwhile consideration. Also, remember that antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are useless against the common cold. Some antibiotics may be available in Myanmar's urban areas if an unexpected illness comes up.
- **Band-aids, gauze, tape** – Even though these can all be purchased in country, they are lightweight and worth having handy, because when needed, they're needed *right now*! Also, yogis have reported that some band-aids bought in Myanmar are not very adhesive and

easily fall off. Remember to use a topical antiseptic when patching yourself up.

- **Mosquito repellent** – Myanmar has a lot of **mosquitoes!** There are repellents to apply to the body as a spray or cream, with either herbal or chemical active ingredients. Mosquito coils, which are burned like incense but contain mosquito-repelling ingredients, are commonly used in Myanmar. The coils can provide sufficient protection for several people in a small area, like an open veranda or the space surrounding yogis meditating at a pagoda. Mosquito coils are cheap and widely available.¹ To burn mosquito coils, the safest bet is to use a special circular tin container with a lid that has open holes, made for burning coils. They are sold separately and widely available throughout the country.
- **Anti-itch ointment** – If one does not have a favorite herbal or pharmaceutical anti-itch brand to take along for those inevitable **mosquito bites** as well as the kisses of other insects, there are a variety of herbal-based bite creams available in the country.
- **Surgical masks or handkerchiefs** – People sensitive to smog, dust or exhaust will be glad to have something to protect their airways, especially when in transit. In contrast to the West, many Asians (though rarely Burmese) wear gauze or cloth masks over the mouth and nose in public. Masks purchased in Asia are made for use in daily life and look less “medical” than typical surgical masks. Mandalay has more air pollution than Yangon, primarily because scooters are allowed and the land is flatter, often creating stifling inversions.
- **Toiletries** – Soap, shampoo, toothpaste and other basic supplies can be purchased in country. While favorite Western brands may be harder to come by, Myanmar offers a pleasing selection of inexpensive, natural products.
- **Feminine hygiene supplies** – Sanitary pads can be purchased in Myanmar, although the quality and selection are said to be inferior to other countries. Tampons can be hard to come by, so these should probably be purchased before departure.



1 Note that some meditators like to use coils, while others get nauseous from them; some prefer creams and others don't like how they feel on the body, especially when the ointment mixes on the skin with sweat and grime. If one is in a pilgrimage group, this issue may take a bit of open negotiation.

Careful of Chili Fumes!

A traditional belief in Myanmar is that the fumes of frying chilies inflames and increases one's coughs, injuries and wounds.

Water and Food

This section discusses eating and drinking in Myanmar from the standpoints of health and sanitation. For information on the more pleasurable aspects of Myanmar's beverages, [see here](#). Although eating and drinking in Myanmar is not entirely risk-free, information is power, and one can mitigate potential challenges by making wise decisions, and understanding issues concerning hygiene that one may come across while in the country. By and large, the food served at restaurants frequented by travelers is considered safe. These establishments usually do not serve customers unboiled tap water. Other places yogis are likely to stay, such as monasteries or meditation centers, often employ a cooking staff who prepare delicious and safe food, and use some kind of internal system for purifying water. However, more vigilance is recommended in certain situations, such as in rural areas or at tiny restaurants and street vendors. Making sure the food eaten has been cooked thoroughly and the fluid drunk has been purified should keep the traveler from contracting a food-borne illness. That being said, it is also a fact that such diseases are more common here than in developed countries. For this reason, visitors on longer stays should not be surprised if they encounter some kind of digestive trouble, though usually these problems are more bothersome than dangerous. One helpful hint is to drink green tea in place of water (which is common in rural Burma anyway), as it ensures that the water has been boiled; Chinese or **Shan noodle** soups are also recommended for one's liquid intake.

Apart from disease caused by microbes in food and water, the peculiarities of the Burmese diet can present some challenges for people on long-term stays. Still, food in Myanmar is almost always prepared



fresh with few processed ingredients, so with a few adjustments it is not at all challenging to eat healthy.

Reasonable vigilance concerning water, becoming familiar with the basics of Burmese food preparation, and having a willingness to adapt to the local circumstances should keep one's digestive system functioning properly. The following section is intended to lay the groundwork for these behaviors.

■ WATER

ရေငတ်တိုး၊ ရေတွင်းထဲ ကျ။

ye ṇa. ʈou~, ye ʈwe~: ʈhě jā<

“One is thirsty, and falls into a well.”

Finding clean drinking water in Myanmar is not difficult. Bottled water is readily available and considered quite safe, and many Burmese ensure that potable water is filtered or purified. Restaurants are legally required to serve ice made from one of the established water companies. In a nutshell, if one is mindful about the source of the water one is about to drink, the possibility of a health issue stemming from drinking dirty water is pretty small.

The one exception is for those yogis and monastics who venture deep into a secluded region. Historically, Burmese monks seeking intensive meditation were limited in how far they could go primarily by the availability of water. Therefore, meditators wishing to go far off the beaten track are strongly encouraged to look into water access and safety from the outset.

Most monasteries and meditation centers have their own drinking water system, which often includes wells, internal purification systems (often using the reverse osmosis technique through three successive stations), and/or regular delivery of large water containers. Smaller monasteries and pagodas might use a rainwater catchment system (the common method used in the Sagaing Hills for centuries), boil drinking and cooking water, and/or use water filters. Water filters even date back to the time of the Buddha, for these were one of eight requisites given to



monks, underscoring the importance of clean water.

But while clean water is not hard to come by, the extra-cautious may still decide to bring their own purification device along. There are a variety of options available, from iodine tablets to pump filters to ultraviolet “pens.” Here, however, cultural norms and vigilance around personal health intersect. Because the Burmese are so hospitable, one will inevitably be offered cups of tea or coffee along with various snacks wherever one visits, from private homes to monasteries. If one has an especially weak stomach or has just overcome intestinal issues, it can be challenging to know how to respond in such circumstances, and to maintain health while responding to generous courtesy. It is a balance that every yogi will have to find in a variety of situations, for one need not accept every item offered—for example, basic manners do not demand that a vegetarian is expected to partake of a goat brain curry.

At the same time, one should not be so fearful about one’s health that all food and drink are purchased only from trusted sources and then carted around throughout one’s journey. If one is especially concerned, an item can be graciously accepted, even if little is ultimately ingested. “Face” is very important in Myanmar, so outward shows of gratitude will still be appreciated, even if the cup of tea or fried samosa is not actually consumed. And if one genuinely feels the need to refuse something, do so gracefully and with a sincere smile.

*Travelers who choose to purify their water are urged **not** to do so in public.* Go through a purification routine in a hotel room or relative privacy of a bus seat, but one should avoid carrying out a chemistry experiment in a restaurant or someone’s living room. If there is no other choice but to treat one’s water in a public place, do so discreetly and without fanfare. This may also be a good time to point out the Burmese equivalent to the proverb, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Here, one says “*āmyā: mō: khā:, ye tau., tau. te~*” (ဆေးလည်း အစားအစားလည်း စေး), meaning, “If others are having bitter rain water, drink up, too!”

Water is also distributed by vendors who place a large block of ice inside a hanging sock, which very slowly melts into cool water that can then be sold to a grateful parched passerby. However, as a 2014 *New York Times* article noted, this practice is slowly being replaced by the availability of cheap bottled water, and it soon may be a lost art and forgotten memory.

Water and Burmese Culture

Water plays an important role in traditional Burmese life and customs. One of the most important family heirlooms is a silver bowl used in wedding ceremonies. After the bride and groom have had their hands tied together, an act that symbolizes their union, the silver bowl is filled with water, and they immerse their bound hands in it. The water symbolizes the unity of a cool and tranquil married life. Many of these silver bowls are embossed with Jātaka tales or traditional Myanmar scenes. As described in detail in the Monastic Life chapter, the pouring of water also plays a symbolic role during dāna ceremonies and the ensuing sharing of merit.

Water Stands—or Socks—Everywhere!

Traveling in Myanmar, one will soon notice the large, lidded jugs set out by the roadside in every village. These are often made of clay, because as the water “weeps” through the porous material and evaporates, it cools down. These ubiquitous Burmese “water stands” are known as *ye oh sin*. Because the water was prepared mindfully for the specific purpose of drinking, it will almost certainly have been boiled or otherwise filtered (usually through a sieve). Serious Dhamma practitioners who drink from water stands bring much merit to the giver.

Thirsty for Salty Water

“As [some people] are being led by basic instinct, they become thirstier and thirstier for love as if they had drunk salty water. Then they drink it again and again and become more and more thirsty. Being thirsty for sensual pleasures, they indulge in them, as they are unable to see the impending sufferings; they swirl about merrily in the sea of lust. Lust! Lust! The more they lust, the more they are insatiate, just as they cannot quench their thirst by drinking salty water.” Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka



Village Wells

ခုရေတွင်းတူ၊ ခုရေကြည်သောက်

khu ye t̥we~: t̥ū, khu ye jī tau

“Just now the well was dug, and you already want clear water?”

Public wells are focal points of Burmese village life. Not only do they provide the water essential for sustaining this life—for the water allows the tasks of cooking, drinking, washing, and cleaning—but the area around the well is also a gathering place where villagers can meet and catch up. Even more than a century ago, Harold Fielding wrote about the central importance of the well area in *Soul of a People*: “For to draw water is to go to the well, and the well is the great meeting-place of the village. As they fill their jars they lean over the curb and talk, and it is here that is told the latest news, the latest flirtation, the little scandal of the place. Very few men or boys come for water; carrying is not their duty, and there is a proper place for flirtation. So the girls have the well almost to themselves.”

Food

“Se ley asa, esa ley eseh.”

“As medicine is food, food is medicine.”

Most food-related illnesses are caused by eating things that have either not been thoroughly cooked, remained out too long without refrigeration, or inadequately reheated. Eating fruit—which is usually not a source of disease in and of itself—can cause illness if it has been washed with unclean water. Dishes washed in non-purified water can also provide microbes a route into your belly. Therefore, the best strategies for avoiding food-borne illness are:

- Only eat fresh-cooked meals or dishes you know have been reheated thoroughly.
- Peel **fruit** or wash in water you know is clean.
- Wipe your dishes and silverware with a napkin if they arrive at your table wet.¹

¹ This is obviously not the same as disinfecting the surfaces or drying the silverware in high heat that kills bacteria, but is better than leaving possibly contaminated water on the utensils.

Most places where travelers dine serve food that has been prepared safely, including large monasteries and meditation centers that receive a regular influx of foreign meditators. However, just as Burmese share water glasses and teacups, it is customary to sometimes share spoons in communal bowls of **soup**. Yogis should not feel obligated to share utensils if uncomfortable, but as with being offered shared water, one should circumvent this in as respectful and sincere a way as possible.

COMMON AILMENTS AND OTHER CONCERNS

Every country has its own typical health challenges, and Myanmar is no exception. “Forewarned is forearmed” is a saying that applies well here. Many issues can be avoided by a little knowledge and preparation.

Heat Stroke, Exhaustion and Dehydration

ထမင်းအသက် ခုနစ်ရက်၊ ရေအသက် တစ်မနက်။
thame~: atē. khuni. yě., ye atē. tə mənē

“One can survive without food for seven days, but not without water for a single morning.”

Strong **heat** and high humidity, along with a general lack of air conditioning, make for a more challenging climate than most Westerners are used to. In such an environment, the body simply does not move in the same ways as it does in one’s home country. Just as one needs to acclimate to high altitudes, the body also needs time to adjust to humid climates. This often means allowing more time for rest than usual, as well as planning less ambitious days and intentionally scheduling in rest periods even when they may not feel needed. For quite often, the Burmese—who understand their climate perfectly—will be lounging in the shade during the hottest part of

the day, while a pilgrim on a schedule may be undertaking a strenuous hike to a hilltop pagoda. Too much of that, and the body will crash.

Staying **hydrated** and remembering not to push oneself in the heat are two important keys to keeping healthy in Myanmar. However, the distractions and excitement of travel can cause one to overlook how urgently the body needs fluids. (For a story about one New Zealand couple whose daughter suffered the effects of heat stroke, see **here**). One sweats a lot anyway in Myanmar's climate, and strenuous activity will cause one to sweat even more. Through the process of sweating, water and other very important substances are lost, and the more one sweats, the more depleted the body becomes.

To help combat this, besides being less active during the heat of the day, adding a specialized rehydration powder (or oral rehydration salts, known as ORS) to one's water will help the body maintain its balance better in the intense heat. Some travelers choose to take at least one daily as a preventative. Sugary drinks are not as balanced, but they will help replace some of what the body has lost if no ORS is available. A recipe for a simple oral rehydration solution is: one liter of water, two teaspoons of sugar, and half a teaspoon of salt. In addition to pacing oneself and staying hydrated, another way to beat the heat is to wear a hat or use a sun parasol whenever one is outside.



The importance of monitoring one's bodily balance and fluid intake in the enervating Burmese climate cannot be overstated!

Drinking as many as five liters (quarts) per day of fluids may be necessary if one is physically active in the hot season

The result of pushing oneself and not paying careful attention to one's body can cause heat stroke or exhaustion. Both are serious conditions that could land one in the hospital. And even after being cleared for release, one will be more sensitive to heat for about a week after an attack, placing even greater constraints on one's trip.

While there are *always* warning signs for heatstroke, they sometimes do not appear urgent until too late. Dehydration and exhaustion can hit *very* suddenly! Signs to pay attention to include:

- Heavy sweating
- Dizziness
- Persistent physical fatigue
- Hot skin or flushing
- Dark-yellow urine
- A consistently fast pulse
- Headaches
- Mental confusion

If one has been out in the heat and begins to feel any of these symptoms even in a mild way, immediately seek a cool place to rest—sometimes just thirty minutes in the shade with a bottle of water can work wonders. If the symptoms are more severe, consider putting some ice on the neck or under the armpits to cool down faster. Although ice water may seem tempting to drink, it's generally better to go with room-temperature water where possible. Along with all the various recommendations in this section, paring back one's schedule, being sure to get regular and plentiful sleep, resting during the main heat of the day, and eating balanced, regular meals, are also helpful in combating heat exhaustion.

Heat rash (prickly heat)

An uncommon irritation in cooler climates, but another challenge of the heat and humidity of tropical Southeast Asia is heat rash. This is a prickly, stinging sensation caused by blocked sweat glands. It is most common on areas of skin covered by clothing, particularly where the fabric bunches up like the armpits or groin. Excessive walking in dusty environments can also exacerbate this condition. Since this annoying symptom is caused primarily by heat and humidity, the best way to avoid it is to keep the skin as cool and dry as possible. While many people in this part of the world use talcum powder (often with added local herbal ingredients) for heat rash, some medical professionals recommend against applying anything to the body, as talcum powder can clog pores just like sunscreen. Or one can do as the Burmese, and begin wearing a light coat of *thanaka* bark paste, which serves as a curative as well as a preventive. The best brands are said to be Taungyi

Mauk Mei and Shin Ma Daung, which uses lime juice and does not have strong perfume-like chemical scents.

Light and breathable clothing is a must, as is avoiding oil-based skin products (excluding thanakha), which can clog pores.

Digestive problems & diarrhea

Unfamiliar food and dining at irregular times can disturb the digestive system. A more serious (though less common) threat is unfamiliar microbes. Yogis are recommended to review *Shwe Lan's Food* section for detailed advice on eating safely. Many travelers also opt to bring their own trusted digestive remedies. Anecdotally, yogis who have also traveled in India for meditation report having fewer food-related health issues in Myanmar. As American meditator Anpetu Oihankesni commented, “Generally I found the food in Burma to have more energy than in India, the soil seeming less depleted. It is a very fertile land, indeed, in more ways than one.”

If your digestive system is not working properly, whether from external infection or the general stress of travel, there are some simple steps you can follow. First, take it easy on the food. Eat simpler meals, and eat in moderation. If stomach or intestinal problems persist, make an effort to replace all the nutrients, calories, liquids, etc. that are being lost, even if it seems difficult to keep anything down. One of the best “remedies” in this case is rice porridge *yāgu* (ယာဂု, the word used specifically at monasteries) or *sha~ byou* (ဆန်ပြုတ်, the common term), which is eaten across Asia. To make rice porridge, rice is cooked in a large amount of water until it reaches the consistency of a thick soup. For best results, the porridge is then eaten unseasoned, lightly salted, or sometimes with a simple garnish. Also called “congee” in China, rice cooked in this fashion is very easily digested and can provide the body with nutrients without taxing the digestive system. Clear noodle soups are also easy on the stomach, and widely available across Southeast Asia, as is lightly stir-fried vegetables with rice. Plain yogurt is also good, and can easily be found—usually freshly-made—at Burmese street stalls.

Conversely, it's best to avoid meat, fish, and eggs when your stomach is on the brink, as well as heavily spiced or rich food. Some yogis decide to eat strictly vegetarian when in this part of the world

for health reasons, as the risk of food-borne illness is generally higher with animal products. (For tips on vegetarian eating in Myanmar, visit the **Vegetarianism** section in the Food chapter.)

Cola and other carbonated sweet drinks can also be quite easy on the stomach. The sugars are quickly absorbed to provide minimal nutrition and the carbonation helps stimulate a sluggish digestive tract (think Alka-Seltzer). Fresh lime juice mixed with soda water or sugarcane juice is a locally made and more natural choice that has roughly the same effect. A soda and lime drink has the added advantage of being widely available as well as helpful in preventing heat exhaustion.

Finally, there's diarrhea, one of the most common digestive problems, as well as one of the most troublesome. Diarrhea, which can manifest as anything from a mildly annoying symptom to a life-threatening emergency, must be taken seriously. Besides being careful about what one eats, above all, one needs to stay hydrated, taking an oral rehydration solution if available. In mild cases, diarrhea will often resolve naturally, given a few days of rest on a simple diet. But if it persists, one should definitely seek medical treatment.

Parasites

Parasitic infections caught from food and water, which include worms, amoeba and Giardia, are always a possibility when traveling. The symptoms of parasitic invasions often do not manifest right away, so one may want to be examined by a doctor if one experiences any unexplained and persistent physical symptoms (usually digestive related). To protect oneself, follow basic food and water safety practices as described above.

Aching or swollen feet

Some travelers have been shocked upon seeing their feet swell up to the size of balloons in Myanmar's tropical weather! Blood vessels expand in hot weather and walking all day makes blood pool in the lower legs, a combination that can easily lead to sore, swollen feet. Putting one's legs up (way up, like parallel to the wall) for ten to fifteen minutes or soaking them in cool water for a while after a tiring day will refresh the circulation in the feet and energize one for the next

day (however, as has been written elsewhere, one should be careful immediately washing with cold water immediately after coming in from intense heat).

A remedy for sore arches is lava stone, in particular if one is planning on ordaining for any period of time, where more bare-foot walking is involved. Rubbing the soles of one's feet with lava stone and washing them afterwards keeps the soles more flexible and improves their durability.



Dengue Fever

This mosquito-borne disease is a growing problem in Myanmar. There is no vaccine and no treatment. Since mosquitoes carry it, it is important to prevent insect bites, as described **below**. Interestingly, Burmese adults do not seem to contract dengue fever, but children do; however, foreign visitors will not have developed whatever immunity the local Burmese population in dengue-prone areas, and should take precautions.



Malaria

Another serious mosquito-borne illness is malaria. According to the CDC, travelers to areas of Myanmar below about 3,000 feet (1,000 meters), as well as those

going outside the urban centers of Yangon and Mandalay, are at risk of getting malaria. There are many strains of the disease and various treatment options. Up-to-date information on malaria in Myanmar can be found on the CDC's website: www.cdc.gov/malaria/travelers/country_table/b.html. Anecdotally, meditators with extensive experience in Myanmar say malaria is not a major concern unless one plans to stay long-term in rural areas. In this case, local residents will be the best source of information about the malaria risk.

The classic malaria symptom is a recurring cycle of fever and chills that usually lasts about two days per cycle. However, since malaria can also resemble influenza, it should be suspected if flu-like symptoms do not go away after several days. It can take up to three weeks for malaria to appear, so be aware that symptoms could manifest after one returns home. Malaria self-test kits can be purchased in Yangon at large pharmacies. *Before purchase, make sure to check the expiration date.*

Taking preventative measures against **mosquito bites** is often enough to prevent malaria: wearing light-colored pants and long-sleeved shirts, sleeping under a **mosquito net**, and using an effective insect repellent or coils. One might also consider a mosquito net for sitting as well as sleeping. Those going to very remote places, or who are more concerned about this issue, are advised to start a treatment of antimalarial drugs before arriving in Myanmar. As always, prevention is the best cure!



Animals and Insects

In general, Burmese towns certainly do not lack for “creatures.” As is noted in **Chapter 3**, there are a bazillion mosquitoes, along with myriad other insects and animals. Overall, while most yogis do not find their health or safety adversely affected by the plethora of wildlife in Myanmar, there are several issues related to animals that yogis should keep in mind as they travel around the country and continue their practice at monasteries.

DOGS

ဟောင်လွန်းသည့် ခွေး၊ လူ မလေး။

hau~ lö~: tē. khwē:, lū mā lē:

“A dog barking all the time will not bite.”

“While fleeing from a chasing tiger,
don’t heed the dog’s barking.”

Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka, Aphorisms



It is helpful to be attuned to canine behavior in Myanmar, especially as dogs usually sense when someone unfamiliar enters their territory. If one happens upon a dog sniffing the ground, cowering its head or wagging its tail, these are all signs that the animal does not pose a threat. However, a stiffened tail, frozen body posture, and alert eyes and head are signs of possible aggression—although in many cases, this is nothing more than a prelude to a threatening bark. If a dog looks like it might be trouble, the general rule of thumb is not to show fear or run away. Some local residents will menacingly raise their hand as if they are about to throw something—whether you have an object or not doesn’t matter, as many dogs know from experience what this gesture means. Others will walk on in a steady pace ignoring the dog entirely, making a loud clicking noise with the tongue that many Burmese dogs have been conditioned to understand as a warning to back off. Others may simply try mettā.

However, most dogs in Myanmar don’t want a fight, but simply feel a need to defend their territory. Many are happy enough with their monastery leftovers and not looking for any particular trouble. But it’s important to realize that some Burmese dogs may be rabid! If one gets



bitten, and is *very* confident that one has been properly vaccinated, simply wash the wound well with soap and water. The operating words here are “*very* confident”; if not **very**, then one should seek medical attention immediately. *If one is bitten but has not been vaccinated for rabies, an injection of rabies immunoglobulin is needed as soon as possible!* (The same applies to monkey bites.) Note that Burmese dogs are rarely, if ever vaccinated.

■ SNAKES

One statement serves as a clear reminder of the health risk that snakes pose in Myanmar: *Poisonous snakes reportedly kill hundreds of people annually in Myanmar, largely in rural areas.* Most of the country’s snakes are found in the delta and Dry Zone areas. As they prefer thick grass



and swampy areas, yogis may wish to avoid walking in such places in just sandals, and bringing a walking stick to serve as one’s advance guard is not a bad idea. Even if just stepping outside one’s residence for a quick jaunt to the toilet, make sure to carry a flashlight and walk mindfully. If bitten, immediately seek medical attention. If possible, it is also important to describe the snake’s physical appearance to a doctor, as different snake bites require different medical responses.

The king cobra is known as the most poisonous snake in Myanmar. However, this large, black and white reptile is not particularly aggressive. Much more dangerous are Russell’s Vipers, which cause an estimated 1,000 deaths per year worldwide, approximately 70 percent of the total. However, these are only the “reported” figures, and the actual number of incidents is probably higher. Dr. Joseph Slowinski, a respected American herpetologist, died in 2001 in Northern Myanmar after suffering a bite from the Banded Krait (*ngan taw kyar*), a story told in Jamie James’ book *The Snake Charmer*.

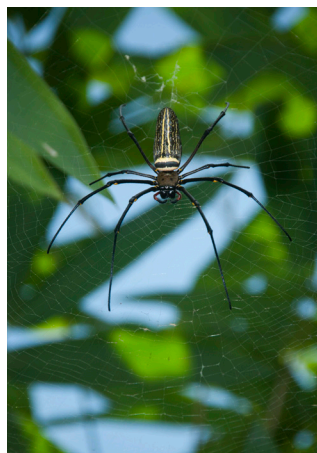
Some yogis bring a snakebite extractor kit, but not many travelers go to such lengths. In more traditional times, an ancient Shan remedy for snakebite involved making a paste out of pounded spiders and spreading this over the wound. U Sarana notes that some Burmese believe that the *kyet hsu pin* tree also has antidote properties for snakebite, and Sayadaw U Tiloka describes a traditional remedy involving a chicken

egg: One first rubs the egg on a rough surface to make the shell thinner, and then punctures the top of thin skin with a needle. Then, the hole of the egg is placed on the bite, with the belief that the “hole in the egg will suck in the poison of the snake.”

INSECTS

Tropical Myanmar is home to a wide variety of bugs, some more bothersome than others. Scorpions and centipedes are some of the most common, though their bites are not deadly, just very painful. The same advice about snakes is applicable here—that is, wear footwear when outside, use a flashlight at night, and walk mindfully and not off the main path. There are some biting spiders and ticks in the wet season, though again, these are considered more a painful annoyance than a serious health danger. Cockroaches, ants, flies and other insects are physically harmless but can be quite annoying, and can also carry illness if areas remain uncleaned. In general, frequent cleanings help to get rid of any food crumbs bugs could survive on, as well as to disrupt places they may be considering taking up residence. Most important is being vigilant with food, as many insects can chew through layers of thin plastic or find entry through narrow openings, so any food should be kept in a thick plastic case that seals well. Better yet is to keep food out of one’s residence entirely, if this is possible.

The Khandha Paritta advises the meditator to have loving kindness towards all beings and in turn asks that no harm be done to oneself. This sutta can be chanted when moving into a rustic abode or if an infestation is found (and in fact is required of forest monks to chant). In particular, it deals with snakes, and comes out of the Jataka Tales as the Buddha’s response to a monk having been killed by snakebite. It is a part of the Vinaya of forests monks to recite this sutta every day. Of course, learning to co-exist with insects to a certain degree is necessary in Myanmar. (And it’s important to accept that one will *never* get rid of all the cockroaches.)



Protection of the Aggregates (*Khandha Parittaṃ*)¹

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling near Sāvattthī at Jetavana monastery in Anathapiṇḍika's park. At that time in Sāvattthī, a certain monk died from a snake bite. Then, an assembly of monks approached the Buddha. Having paid their respects, they sat beside him. So seated, those monks spoke thus to the Blessed One: "Here, Bhante, in Sāvattthī, a certain monk has died from a snake bite." The Buddha replied,

Indeed, monks, that monk did not permeate the four royal snake clans with thoughts of loving-kindness (*mettā*). Had he done so, that monk would not have died of a snake bite. What are the four royal snake clans? They are called Virūpakkha, Erāpatha, Chabyāputta and Kaṇhāgotamaka. Indeed, monks, that monk did not permeate these four royal clans of snakes with thoughts of loving-kindness. Had he done so, he would not have been bitten by a snake and died. Monks, I enjoin you to permeate these four royal clans of snakes with thoughts of loving-kindness, for your safety, for your preservation, and for your protection.

My *mettā* is with the Virūpakkha, And with the Erāpatha too;

My *mettā* is with the Chabyāputta, And also with the
Kaṇhāgotamaka.

May my *mettā* be with all footless
beings

And with all bipeds too,

May my *mettā* be with all quadrupeds
And also with all many-footed creatures.

Let not the footless do me harm
Nor those that have two feet;

Let no quadruped harm me,
Nor those creatures with many feet.

All beings, all living creatures,
And all those who merely exist,

May they experience good fortune, May no harm whatsoever
come to them.



Limitless is the Buddha, limitless is the Dhamma, limitless is the Saṅgha. Limited are creeping creatures—snakes, scorpions, centipedes, spiders, lizards and rats. I have guarded myself, I have made my protection. Move away from me, you beings. I pay respects to the Blessed One and to the seven Sammāsambuddhas.

1 Translated by Kory Goldberg & Michelle Décary from *Along the Path*

MOSQUITOES

Mosquitoes, in particular, are an ever-present fact of life in the Golden Land, buzzing their high-pitched squeal from the bustling inner city to the bucolic rural countryside, swarming around dense forests and open rice paddies alike, one's fairly constant companions from placid lakes to flowing rivers. As Sir Herbert White dramatically wrote in 1917, "Burma could show places where mosquitoes were more numerous and more valiant, where even cattle had to be put under nets at night and prisoners in jail protected by iron gratings."

As with so many other life events that seem to "go wrong," working with the reality of mosquitoes can also be seen as yet another part of the practice. Ajahn Sumedho from the Thai forest tradition has been known to remind yogis that in this part of the world one of your most revered teachers will be Ajahn Mosquito, who can always be counted on to help test your current state of equanimity. And there is also the theory that eventually one builds up a natural resistance to the pesky fliers, as Sir White acknowledged that "after a short time one seems to become more or less immune against ordinary mosquito bites. The new-comer is more succulent and more attractive to this friendly insect."

Mention has already been made of the serious mosquito borne illnesses one can contract in Myanmar. But mosquito bites themselves can be challenging to deal with as the total mounts. A dozen or so bites

a day seems the status quo, although preventative measures (such as the ones described above in this chapter) can keep this number from increasing. Sleep can be impacted by too many mosquitoes, so proactively trying to stay bite-free during sleep hours is highly recommended. Whenever feasible, sitting or lying inside a **mosquito net** is advised.



BEDBUGS

The nursery rhyme ditty "Nighty night, sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite," may be familiar to many American yogis, but this is more than just a cute rhyme in Myanmar. These small, oval bugs are about the size of an apple seed, and feed solely on human and animal blood. While not transmitting serious diseases, they show little mercy in their biting habits and a meditator can easily wake up

with several hundred itchy red dots across the body. They are almost impossible to detect, as they only come out at night and can live (and travel) undetected in anything from luggage to clothing to furniture. A common place to find them is within a mattress seam or cracks in a bed frame, so a smart, preventative measure is thoroughly cleaning one's bed before settling into a new room. However, the bad news is that unlike cockroaches, a bedbug infestation is *not* necessarily a sign of dirtiness; thus even the most careful of cleanings will probably not be enough to drive them away.

The bites, themselves, are usually not felt at the moment they draw blood, but rather later turn into itchy welts that can last over a week. For those who have never seen the bites before, they can sometimes be mistakenly attributed to mosquitoes or spiders, causing the nightly attacks to increase. When left untreated, they can lead to skin rashes, allergic symptoms, and even psychological effects. Yes, there's a reason many people are freaked out by bedbugs!

So what should the unfortunate yogi do who suffers a bedbug infestation? The basic tasks would be to complete a thorough cleaning of one's room (and especially the sleeping area, mattress, and linens). Even better is to simply change rooms if this is possible. But beware—if bedbugs have already migrated to your belongings, these also need to be treated, otherwise the bedbugs will happily change rooms along with you.

The question then comes, how to treat potentially infested items? First, immediately wash all of one's clothes, and then put them (along with all one's personal items) in the hot sun for a few hours, as heat is the one factor that will drive bed bugs away. For those especially concerned about the possibility of bedbugs, one suggestion is to keep a complete change of clothes sealed in several layers of zip-loc bags. This way, if bedbugs do come calling, you will have the reprieve of sanitized clothing while you take care of all your other effects. Also consider adding "bug chalk" to one's medicine kit; after rubbing this chalk around one's bed (which makes it look like a marked-off accident scene), the chemicals in the chalk are said to prevent bugs from crossing.¹ Another suggestion is to thoroughly shake out one's linens and hang them every day, thus disrupting the potential trail that bedbugs may be making to find your sleeping area.

1 Putting a layer of turmeric powder around objects forms a barrier that ants will not cross.

CLINICS AND HOSPITALS

အနာသိခါ။ ဆေးရှိရ။
anā ti khā, shē ṣi yā

“Right diagnosis leads to right treatment.”

If a health condition arises, *Shwe Lan* recommends that yogis combine the information in this section with local advice. As mentioned earlier, for urgent medical attention, consider going to Bangkok. If one seeks medical help in Myanmar, private clinics are considered better overall, although government hospitals are better equipped to treat serious injuries and life-threatening emergencies.

Listings for clinics, hospitals and other facilities in this chapter were gleaned from recommendations from several sources. *Note that their inclusion in this book is not a guarantee of their quality, nor should it be taken as the advice of this book to use those particular facilities.*

Going to the Doctor—or Not—in Villages

“Looking back to those years...one of the major problems was the lack of roads and means of transport. Footpaths and dust roads did not provide easy or fast access. It often took two to three days for the sick to get to a hospital in a major town. That is if they believed in Western medicines or had been coaxed into seeing a doctor. Many relied on herbal medicines given to them by the *hsaya*, their village medicine man.” Sao Sanda, *The Moon Princess*, describing her early years in Shan state

The following lists the major pharmacies, doctors, and hospitals in Yangon. Travelers with more serious health issues are recommended to go urban areas, preferably Yangon or Mandalay. For less pressing health issues, or if one is far from a city, it is best to ask local friends or residents for advice, as they will know their own area best. In future editions, *Shwe Lan* would like to expand this list further, and readers are invited to share their experiences at clinics and hospitals outside Yangon at: burmadhamma@gmail.com.

● PHARMACY

AA Pharmacy

Address: 142-146 Sule Paya Rd
Hours: 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m.
Extra info: North of Sule Paya

● PRIVATE HOSPITALS AND CLINICS

International SOS Clinic

Address: Inya Lake Hotel, 37 Kaba Aye Pagoda Rd.
Tel: 01-567871, 557879, 667377
Website: www.internationalsos.com
Hours:
8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon-Fri and
8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Sat
Extra info: Said to be Yangon's best emergency option. The clinic also accepts many international health insurance policies.

Pun Hlaing International Clinic

<http://punhlainghospital.com/>
Address: FMI Centre 4F, Bogyoke Aung San Road
Tel: 01-243010
Hours:
9:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Mon-Sat and
10:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. Sun
Extra info: Reported to be a good option with modern facilities.

Bahosi Hospital

Address: No.B (1-6), (31-36), (37/38), Bahosi Housing Complex, Lanmadaw Township
Tel: 01-2300502 to 2300530.
Hotline: 01-2300631
Website: www.bahosimedical.com
Hours: Open 24 hours

Victoria Hospital

Address: No. 68, Taw Win Street, 9 Mile, Mayangone Township, Yangon.
Tel: (+951) 9666141 (Hunt Line);
fax: (+951) 9666135
Website:
info@witoriyahospital.com
<http://www.victoriahospitalmyanmar.com/>
Hours: Open 24 hours

Nandaw Palace Hospital

Address: Between 28st & 29st and 70st & 71st, Mandalay
Tel: 02-36128, 02-60443

● GOVERNMENT HOSPITALS

Yangon General Hospital (YGH)

Address: Bogyoke Aung San Road, Latha Township
Tel: 01-256112 to 31
Hours: Open 24 hours

Yangon General Hospital (New)

Address: Bogyoke Aung San Road, Corner of Pyay Road, Ward (12), Lanmadaw Township
Tel: 01-384493 to 95
Hours: Open 24 hours

● DENTISTS

Dr. D Dental Clinic

Address: No. 16, Shwe Sabei Yeik Mon, Bayintnaung Road, Kamayut
Tel: 01-560863

Dental Art Dental Clinic

Address: No. 365/367, IHBC Building 3rd Floor, Bo Aung Kyaw Street, Bota Htaung Township
Tel: 01-392919

DENT Myanmar

Address: Condo C, Room 001,
Tekhatho Yeikmon Housing, New
University Avenue Road, Bahan
Township
Tel: 01-542375, 546663,
09-8615162
Hours: 9:30 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. daily
Extra info: Near Kabar Aye Paya
Road, opposite of MRTV-4 building

● **CHINESE MEDICINE****Lawka Nat**

Address: 27/A Ywama Kyaung
Street, Hlaing Township
Tel: 01-511122, 526765
Hours: Afternoons and evenings
Extra info: Run by a Burmese doctor
who studied in Taiwan and China.
Note the Buddhist paintings on
display here were donated by an U
Goenka meditator who frequented
the clinic often.

Myint Tet Acupuncture Clinic

Address: No. 451 Pyay Road,
Kamaryut Township,
Tel: 01-536268
Hours:

8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Mon-Sat and
12:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Sun
Extra info: In front of Institute of
Medicine

Clinic of U Kyi Win

Address: 31 A Shwe Hintar
Extra info: U Kyi Win is ninety
years young and speaks only
Burmese and Mandarin, so a
translator will be needed for English
communication. He has sixty years
of experience in the field and grows
much of his own herbs. He does not
charge for his services but accepts
donations.

● **CHINESE CHIROPRACTOR****U Zaw Min Htet**

Address: Moe Thee 1 Clinic,
Yaykyaw Street, opposite YMBA,
Yangon
Tel: 09 5081266 (cell)
Hours: 1 pm to 3 pm, M-F; closed
on Sundays
This practitioner may be a bit
more expensive than other similar
healers, as his clients believe that
he can treat many patients with just
one visit.

Emergency Services

Note that English-speaking operators may not be available at all times when calling these numbers, but they are good to keep on hand in case of emergency.

- Ambulance: **192**
- Police: **199**
- Fire: **191**
- Red Cross: **383 680** (Yangon only)

MEDICINE AND SPIRITUALITY

Buddhism has infused almost all aspects of Burmese culture, and so it should come as no surprise that medicine is no exception. Many medical professionals practice very much within a Buddhist context. This refers not only to *where* they practice medicine, since many volunteer at free clinics inside monastic compounds, but also *how* they view the very nature of healing and disease. Indeed, it is not uncommon to meet Western-trained Burmese doctors who follow *sīla* carefully and undertake concentration practices in the belief this will help them in their work. Additionally, the lines between religion and medicine in Myanmar are sometimes blurred, in ways that sometimes may not be backed up by the scriptures. Ointments sold at religious sites claim effects both physical and spiritual, and Buddhist artifacts, relics and suttas are believed by some to have the power to overcome disease. Monks with an understanding of traditional medicine may use their knowledge to treat fellow monastics when they become ill. Eventually, some may develop renowned reputations and large followings based on their healing abilities.¹ According to Vinaya regulations, monks are prohibited from fulfilling these worldly roles, although in practice there may be exceptions, particularly among *weikza* followers.² Today, many monasteries run charity clinics that offer free or reduced-cost care using both modern and traditional methods.

Amulets and Other “Lesser Magical Practices”

The Buddha taught that amulets and charms have no place on the Path. He incorporates these into a body of knowledge he termed *tiracchanavijja*, or “animal knowledge,” which he termed “lesser magical practices.” These practices include telling the future, making charms, etc.

1 Today, an alternative medicine used by some monasteries are fruits soaked in bull urine for three years, also known by some as “monk chocolates.”

2 To quote just one example of this, Michael Mendelson wrote in *Sangha and State in Burma* that in the late 1900s “certain curing monks, such as the Sewungaba Sayadaw were constantly touring the country selling their wares and building monasteries with the proceeds.”



Traditional Medicine & Healing Arts



Like modern medicine, traditional medicine in Myanmar has close ties to Buddhism, and the country is home to many native medical traditions. Overall, there does not appear to be a clear canon of theories and practices that can be labeled “Traditional Burmese Medicine,” as one finds in China or India, and where a clear path of systemized study has been in place for centuries. Rather, there is a broad body of techniques and ideas—some indigenous, some imported, some spiritual, some secular, some Buddhist, some animist—that have been used since before the arrival of modern medicine to treat and prevent disease, and which continue to flourish today.¹ The University of Traditional Medicine in Mandalay offers a general overview in the prevailing traditional techniques. It accepts about one hundred students per year for its five-year program, and they study a variety of indigenous medical techniques relating to herbalism and physical medicine. They also study a mix of Chinese acupuncture and Indian ayurvedic practices.

Many Burmese today take advantage of the wide variety of traditional medicine available. Herbal remedies are commonly sold at most stores and pharmacies, and traditional hospitals and clinics are found throughout the country. For those that wish to try it, best is to explain one’s symptoms to a Burmese friend, who then

When All Else Fails...

In Shan culture, if other forms of medical intervention didn’t work, skin of the patient was punctured with a hot needle, in the belief that the evil spirit would leave with the blood.

¹ Prime Minister U Nu even awarded state honors to renowned indigenous healers of his day.

can recommend the appropriate local herbalist.

Some lay practitioners use herbal remedies alongside prayer, exorcism, channeling and other spiritual practices. Some healers may inquire about the precise birthdate of the patient and may consult astrology before applying treatment. One anecdote illustrates this *mélange* clearly. An American yogi who fell ill described being treated by a local man who prodded him from head to foot with a special pick made from several dozen types of rare wood. The practitioner afterward discussed his training in this technique, noting that the most important part was strict adherence to the five *sīla*, without which nothing would work. Indeed, before beginning his work, he made a formal statement of *sacca*, declaring the truth of his keeping the precepts and by this truth beginning his healing work.

It should be reiterated that herbal medicine is largely an unregulated industry and there are many stories of fake remedies or “herbal” pills that actually contain modern pharmaceuticals. There are also reports of unlicensed practitioners of Burmese or Chinese medicine offering cures or remedies at exorbitant prices. Whatever medical care you choose to receive in Myanmar, please do so with caution and good judgment. While there is very little written material on Burmese medicine available in English, there are certainly opportunities to learn more about this practice while in Myanmar.

Some stalls selling herbal medicines can be found on **Shwe Bon Thar Street** in Yangon near Sule Pagoda. Otherwise, it’s best to ask one’s friends to find out where such medicines and herablists can be sought.

■ MESSAGE

Another well-known form of traditional healing is massage. This is especially common in neighboring Thailand, where massage parlors can be found on any street and institutes offer advanced degrees in mastering this art. In Myanmar, Yangon has a handful of places that cater to tourists, while in other regions it is not so common. Generally, although it is not common in Burmese culture to pay for a massage, giving a massage is quite common among friends and family members of the same gender, and it is expected in many circumstances for a junior to regularly massage his or her senior. This may take the form of a young man massaging the feet of his father or grandfather, or a novice massaging the legs and arms of a Sayadaw or senior monks.

Some traditional Burmese massage techniques are found only in very rural settings. This involves, in the words of local author Hpone Thant, “walking over your body and twisting your limbs to loosen the muscles. They also might press on the major arteries, and later release them to send a warm sensation as the blood rushes back. This is known as ‘letting off heat’ in Burmese. I’ve never liked this kind of traditional massage. It’s more like physical torture for me.” Much more common in Myanmar is the unisex salon, where a wide range of services can provide a similar relief as a massage. In addition to standard haircuts you can get a head massage, shampoo, facial cleanse, shave, and ear cleaning.

An Ancient Buddhist Medicine

While the Vinaya restricts monks from eating after noon, the Buddha did allow rare exceptions in case of illness or hunger. According to the Pāḷi Canon, there are five items monks can consume after noon—sugar, honey, butter, oil, and ghee. Long ago, four of these substances were combined to create a nourishing substance called *catumadhura* in Pāḷi, which means “four sweet [ingredients].” In Myanmar, this combination of sugar, honey, ghee and (usually) sesame oil is called *satumadhu* and is widely available for purchase in pharmacies and small shops. The most common brand comes in glass or plastic bottles that have a yellow and red label and costs about 2,000 kyat each. Note, however, that some believe the glass-bottled product to be superior to the *satumadhu* found in plastic containers, for cheap vegetable oil is sometimes used in the latter in place of sesame.

Some monks consume *satumadhu* only when they are ill, while others see it like jaggery in that it can be taken after noon. Different interpretations govern how a monk can eat it, for the Pāḷi scriptures are not specific in this regard. Some feel it is the equivalent of fruit juice and subject to the same set of restrictions, meaning that it must be mixed with water prior to drinking (unless, that is, it is being used as a medicine). However, others feel that it is similar to jaggery, which the Buddha allowed monks to have in any form and at any time. Maha Gandayone U Janaka had a much stricter interpretation and felt it should only be taken when ill, a practice followed today by the strictest monks. Monks are not the only people who eat *satumadhu*, as laypeople also take it when they are feeling under the weather and children like it just as a snack, since it is quite sweet and hearty.

“Special” Ointments

One traditional concoction that may appeal to the adventurous traveler can be found around Golden Rock Pagoda in Kyaiktyo. Here, many of the pilgrims who trek up the steep mountain to see the famous pagoda exhaust themselves in their quest for the summit. As they scale the mountain, stalls begin appearing that offer “special” ointments and salves for those in need. In an upper bowl is a decaying mixture of herbs, powders, vegetables, goat horns, squirrel skulls, bear paws, porcupine quills, hornbill beaks, giant centipedes and scorpions, monkey fur, and snake skins. A small filter placed at the end of the bowl allows the blackish gray, greasy ointment to gradually collect in a larger bowl. For a high cost, pilgrims can purchase some of this mixture to spread on their joints, or for the brave, to swallow. One American yogi who ascended Golden Rock wondered about the karmic trade-offs of massaging oils from endangered animals into one’s bones in order to pay homage to the sacred pagoda.

■ A BURMESE TRADITIONAL HEALTH EXPERIENCE

Sayagyi U Shein, who passed away just as Shwe Lan was going to print, was an example of a traditional healer who bridged the gap between medicine and spirituality. U Shein oversaw an active practice in Yangon and was best known for the alchemical concoction “Gold Ash Powder.” His life’s work attests to how difficult it is to place Burmese practitioners like him into simple categorizations like scientific, shamanistic, Buddhist, etc.

U Shein was featured in the documentary “Shamanic Healing,” made by the German Clemens Cuby (and which also showed healers in Peru, Russia, Nepal, and South Korea). The film examined how U Shein operated within several spheres at once. For instance, the documentary interviews patients coming to U Shein for help. Many seek cures for serious physical diseases, while other patients request help for psycho-spiritual issues (there is one striking scene where he interacts with a woman who appears possessed). And while U Shein claimed that devas bestowed the recipe for Gold Ash Powder on him through visions and dreams during a time that he was suffering severe war injuries and expected to die, his website features a detailed chemical analysis of its formula. He was awarded a Visadhara title by the traditional medicine department of the Ministry of Health, in recognition of his achievements and skills.

According to his website, Gold Ash Powder is made in a painstaking five-step process, the first step alone taking twenty years to complete! This initial step involves melting together such metals as gold, silver and mercury, and is performed by monks in Shan State. A mixture of fruit and honey is then added to “feed” the resulting product, which is stored in varying states for up to two decades. The next four steps in producing the pills and capsules are much shorter. U Shein also said that *cetana*, or compassion, is one of the key ingredients in any healing.

Sayagi U Shein operated very much within a Buddhist context, though one that may be quite unfamiliar to yogis accustomed to the Theravada traditions or to meditation centers. In “Welcome to the Land of Gold Ash Powder,” a short booklet about U Shein’s life and work, there are several descriptions attesting to the power of his *samatha* and *vipassanā* practice. In the book, maintaining the five precepts is mentioned as being key to both his own healing powers and to the recovery of his patients. In one story, a foreign visitor makes video recordings of U Shein performing healings to show people back home, but after returning to his country, the tapes are completely blank. When he calls U Shein to tell him what happened, the healer says the tapes were blank because he broke a promise to carry a photo of a “dynastic Buddha statue” home with him and worship it.

U Shein was neither a businessman nor charity doctor. Although the film says he charged nothing for his services or medication, the pills available for purchase on his website are not cheap—on the other hand, perhaps not surprisingly for medicine that takes over twenty years to make! Ten pills per day are recommended for over three months to treat “chronic diseases,” at a cost of over \$500.

In the West, practitioners of alternative medicine tend to promote themselves as either physical or spiritual healers, not both. Though there is a movement to put more emphasis on mind-body integration in modern medicine, one would be hard pressed to find a Western doctor willing to treat both cancer and demonic possession, and to do so while integrating his own religious beliefs. U Shein’s life represents how Myanmar’s traditional medicine has intertwined itself with spirituality and religion. While the type of healing he offered appears to remain sought after today, such shamanistic healers have not fared well during other nation’s marches towards modernity.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE CLINICS

Yangon: Traditional Medicine Hospital (Government run)

Address: No. 90, Ngar Htet Kyee Pagoda Road, Bo Cho Ward (2), Bahan Township

Tel: 01-545763, 01-557048

Mandalay: University of Traditional Medicine

Address: Mandalay-Myitkyinar Highway, Aungmyethazan Township

Extra info: It is unknown if the university runs a clinic that is open to the public.



Three Travelers' Tales

1

"On a family trip (my wife, our two children, and I), my 11-year-old daughter contracted a gastric illness that lasted a number of days. One morning in Mandalay she collapsed and briefly lost consciousness. Although this turned out to be from simple dehydration, at the time we didn't know what was happening and felt a lot of fear.

We called our travel insurer who provided good help and support, and then took our daughter to a private hospital recommended by our hotel (Palace Hospital). Looking back on it now, after a successful outcome, it was an interesting experience. On arrival at the hospital, everything felt very strange and quite unlike hospitals at home. We sat in a busy waiting area that had a large display cabinet on one wall containing dozens of organs pickled in formaldehyde, all exhibiting some disease or another! After a time, my daughter was seen by a very friendly female pediatrician named Professor Thida. Thankfully, Prof. Thida's English was reasonably good and we were able to communicate. A diagnosis of simple dehydration was given and a rehydration solution was prescribed. My daughter was also given a general check-up, including blood pressure, blood sugars and even an ECG. We were nervous about the blood test: were needles going to be new and sterile in such a poor country? Yes, as it turned out. That evening, we returned for the blood results and another check-up (all good). The total costs were quite reasonable—around \$40 for the initial hospital visit and a little less for the evening visit.

In general, we found it easier to stay healthy in Burma than we did in India. Good travel insurance that will pay for evacuation in case of emergency is really important. We were glad to have it during my daughter's brief health episode."

— Bruce Forbes

2

“My experience with the health care system here has been quite dismal. I contracted malaria in West Africa, and in Myanmar several months later I had what I am nearly certain was a recurrence of the same malaria infection.

I went to the malaria testing center in Mandalay and because the parasite did not show up in my blood (which I was told by a doctor in Africa is quite common), they did not give me any medication. I went to a private hospital but the doctor there was unprofessional and barely listened to me. I tried another doctor and explained to him that I had had a fever for three days and it was not responding to acetaminophen, but sure enough, when I got my prescription it contained acetaminophen. Of course, the prescription did not lower the fever.

I became so frustrated with the healthcare system and I was so weak and delirious from fever, I gave up on seeing a doctor and just resigned myself to fate, though I eventually found treatment for bronchitis caused by the malaria at a free monastery clinic. Thankfully, the fevers eventually disappeared.

In short, I was not impressed with the Burmese health care system at all. I believe it is better to go to Thailand if possible.

Also, I prefer to purchase most of my health-related products outside the country. Oral rehydration salts, over the counter items to help with respiratory problems due to the dust in Mandalay, and some basic things are available here. I actually buy all of my shampoo, conditioner, facial care products, and even clothes outside the country because I have personal preferences and also because foreign brands are more expensive here.

Basically, prevention is key to staying healthy. During winter don't sleep on the floor without a mattress, wear warm clothes, sleep with a blanket, cover your head at night, wrap your neck, and don't walk outside barefoot when it's wet. Also, wear a mask, sunglasses, and cover your skin when you are on a motorbike or you risk developing skin and respiratory problems.

Another common piece of advice I hear is to find a doctor who was trained before 1988.”

—American volunteer

3

“After some time, I started to have health problems related to food and poor hygiene. At the beginning I had problems with digestion, and the precept of not taking food in the afternoon was very difficult because I previously had gastritis and colitis, so the body was reacting a lot. In Kalaw I had a lot of diarrhea and when I returned to Yangon it was even worse. I needed to learn about local medicines because what I was taking was not working very well. So I tried many things and I asked local people for help and advice. Most of the time they were extremely kind and helpful. They really tried to take care as much as they could.

The food in Myanmar tended to be extremely oily. It is the way they protect the food from fungus because of the heat. However, the quality of the oil is not so good, and often very cheap oil is used, so I sometimes struggle with digestive problems.

I could get some good information thanks to the doctors, who most of the time were very kind and willing to help, however, the standard of allopathic medicines was not so high. The best medicine in Myanmar in my experience is the local medicine, because it works especially for those illnesses found in the country. Eventually I decided to ask mothers what medicine they use to give to their babies when they had strong diarrhea.

It is good also to have supplements because in monasteries yogis can only eat twice daily, and the food may have much oil, with clean hygiene not assured. Garlic helps to reduce cholesterol and to improve the immune system. Spirulina helps to keep one strong and is widely available and cheap in Myanmar. Probiotics helps with chronic diarrhea. Ginger is good to improve digestion and heat in the body. Magnesium is good for constipation. I recommend to know the local medicine and to learn from Ayurveda or Tibetan medicine. Those medicines can balance the body with alimentation, so it is easier to find the products and just take them. In my experience this works better than antibiotics.”

—Sandra, Mexican yogi

HEALTH AND DHAMMA

This chapter has been on the subject of health challenges, remedies and preventions. However, since this guide is intended primarily for meditators, it is worth reflecting on the Buddha's teachings regarding health. Of particular importance is one's mental relationship with any ongoing or newly acquired health issue. In the Buddha's teaching, of course, the highest pinnacle of health and well-being comes from attending to one's own mind.

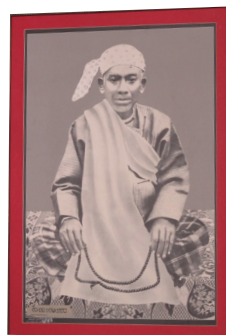


Many yogis are familiar with the role that health played in the spiritual journey of Sayagyi U Goenka. To recap briefly for those who are unfamiliar, U Goenka had suffered from excruciating migraines, which could not be cured either in Burma, or by the Western and Japanese doctors he sought out. Even worse, he was becoming addicted to the strong opiates that had been prescribed for pain relief. Finally, he came to Sayagyi U Ba Khin and asked to be accepted into a 10-day meditation course as a last resort to try and rid himself of the headaches. U Ba Khin told him that he could not attend a meditation course if his goal was to merely rid himself from his debilitating migraine headaches. U Goenka agreed to strictly seek spiritual development, although his eventual participation did, in fact, end the painful affliction that had driven him to desperation. This is a powerful reminder that while the act of meditation can be seen to get to the heart of many psychosomatic diseases, the yogi is cautioned that the mere curing of one's health ailments should not be a goal of practice (at least in the Theravādin Buddhist tradition), as U Ba Khin famously told U Goenka. In this sense, taking to the cushion with the hope of ridding oneself of a health problem is as mistaken as praying to a Buddha statue for worldly gain.

The following incident from the life of Sayagyi U Ba Khin illustrates how this great meditation teacher approached a physical ailment himself. U Ko Lay related how U Ba Khin once contracted an eye disease that was so serious he had to take five months leave from work. Even more distressing, because his eye was extremely

sensitive to light, he was not able to be by his teacher Saya Thet Gyi's side when he passed in 1945. U Ko Lay does not specify what kind of illness U Ba Khin contracted, but from the description it seems likely it was some kind of infection or inflammation. After over a year of seeking various treatments, he left one hospital visit deciding to take an *adhiṭṭhāna* (or decision of strong determination). He vowed to restrict his diet for ten days to rice topped with a mixture of salt and sesame oil, and to eat it before noon. He also directed his awareness to the experience of *anicca* on his face in particular. According to U Ko Lay, the problem resolved in a number of days and U Ba Khin could resume normal life.

What lesson is the meditator to draw from this story? A superficial conclusion would be that U Ba Khin's *Vipassanā* practice "cured" his eye disease. However, given how U Ba Khin dealt with U Goenka and his severe migraine problems, it seems highly unlikely that he would ever practice with this intent himself. Also, questions remain. For example, who can say what role the *Vipassanā* practice had in the recovery? And who knows for sure how the sudden change of diet contributed



to the rapid improvement? What this story does demonstrate, and may have been U Ko Lay's original intent in sharing, is how an advanced student of meditation integrated the inevitable experience of being sick into his practice. A wider understanding of the Burmese context may also be helpful to the foreign reader, where a belief persists that austere, moral living should be undertaken especially in times of crisis, even if temporarily. And some highly venerated monks have become well-known particularly for their austere eating practices—for example, Beh Sar (Bean-Eating) Sayadaw from the Sagaing Hills was known to eat just a few beans daily. What is almost certain in this case is that U Ba Khin's practice helped him navigate an unpleasant situation without losing the balance of his mind.

Another moral of the story is that great meditation teachers (and even Arahants) get sick! And, as U Sein Lin remembers, "Sayagyi said that only when you are physically in good condition can you teach Dhamma effectively." And when one does become ill, it is a powerful reminder that physical suffering need not lead to mental suffering.

Study of the Body, Study of the Mind

Living in the 19th century, the outward-looking Burmese scholar U Hpo Hlaing amassed an impressive library of Western books, and worked to ensure that many young Burmese could travel abroad for studies. He also translated many technical books into Burmese, including a French chemistry text and an Italian book on anatomy. Today, his *Udobhojana Sangah* (a book on traditional medicine) is still widely read. The scholar also played a pivotal role in helping Ledi Sayadaw understand the land beyond Burma's borders, and Ledi began using this knowledge increasingly in his own writings. For example, in Chapter Six of Ledi's *Vipassanā Dīpanī*, the monk references the Abhidhammic contemplation of the body to Western biological facts, thus connecting Western scientific and Eastern (Buddhist) concepts of body knowledge. However, Erik Braun points out that "in Ledi's writings about meditation there is a sharp difference with Hpo Hlaing's texts. The innovative quality of Ledi's works lies in their explicit call to practice. Hlaing's books at most presage this call."



Health and Mettā

"Some time ago, I was in Vancouver, Canada, in a bookshop... a forty-year old woman with a fair complexion walked over to me and stood quietly beside me. After a short moment, she said to me, 'Please allow me to stand here. My health is not good, and I feel very weak both mentally and physically. It is a long time since I have been well. However, standing next to you both my mental and physical strength have come back, and I feel peaceful in body and mind.' So, I gave her permission and said, 'Please stand here.' While I was looking at books, she waited quietly beside me for quite a long time. After about an hour, I think she felt a bit embarrassed. With her hands folded across her chest, she said, 'Thank you so much for the peace that you have given to me. I am so happy. I have never experienced such peace in my whole life.' Then with these words, she left. I think this incident happened because I practise mettā meditation every day. As a result, she experienced peace in her body and mind and regained her full mental and physical strength. In response to the strength and power of a person's mettā, beings coming into contact with that person will feel peaceful, happy, serene and strong. This is completely natural." Sayadaw U Indaka of Chan Myay Myaing, *Metta: The Practice of Loving-Kindness as the Foundation for Insight Meditation Practice*



Healthy and Wise

Dr. Nikhil Mehta of India shares some thoughts on health in Myanmar:

“Staying healthy requires the wisdom of moderation, something that is being lost in the fast pace of modern life. Moderation meaning knowing what is appropriate for you—not too much, but also not too little. Today we let outside parties like doctors and the media guide us in deciding how much to eat, how much to drink, how to live. The speed of our lives has robbed us of the awareness of our bodies’ messages. And even if we become aware, we don’t always respect the signals, instead acting on information stored in our brains. In other words, we give precedence to intelligence over our own experience. We overrule our body’s signals. We drink though we are not thirsty and eat though we are not hungry. We have become machines that have lost the art of moderation.

In Myanmar I encountered a country that retains the natural pace of life, this moderation, this wisdom. I traveled to Myanmar for the second time in 2008 to conduct a Vipassanā course at Dhamma Joti in Yangon. Around sixty men had registered for the course. Before the course started, as I was looking over their registration forms, I was amazed to see that out of sixty people, only two or three reported some kind of physical or mental health issue. My mind went back to courses in India, where nearly half the participants would report some kind of health problem, even very young students. As an allopathic medical doctor, and especially as a student of Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India, I was intrigued as to why there was such a big difference in health between Burmese and Indians.

Observing the country from a doctor’s standpoint on my first visit to Myanmar, on a Dhamma yatra led by U Goenka in 2002, it seemed that good health was common among the Burmese. I was surprised not to see so many hospitals on the streets of Yangon, further confirming my impression that this was a country of good health, despite its lack of material richness. I also felt Myanmar to be wealthy in terms hospitality, culture, and its environment.

Ayurveda, the medical science practiced in India at the time of the Buddha, describes health as a table standing on three legs—food, rest and morality. My observations of everyday Burmese society showed me that most people’s tables had strong legs. It seems that a culture of working and waking late has not taken root in Myanmar, and people start and end their days early. At the market, I noticed that most shops closed down early in the evening, so people end up eating dinner early, a few hours before going to bed. Many medical traditions recommend this habit for maintaining good digestion.

While shopping, I noticed that store clerks would take out their tiffins and eat when noon arrived, even if they were attending to a customer. In my culture, we don’t really respect hunger; we end up grabbing fast food or sometimes just don’t eat. But the Burmese pay attention to their body’s signals and strengthened one of the legs of health. Seeing the fundamental laws of health laid down by Ayurveda in practice was wonderful.

A characteristic of the Burmese diet is that it is rich in oil, one of nature’s three most effective remedies, according to Ayurveda. Oil improves dryness, slows aging, eases pain and prevents deterioration of the body. Modern science tells us that good quality (cold pressed) oils are rich in antioxidants, which prevent tissue degeneration. I believe one secret behind the health of the Burmese is their use of oil, which is seen as crucial by both Ayurveda and modern medicine.

The third leg of health, morality, is also strong in Myanmar due to the influence of centuries of contact with the teachings of Buddha. U Goenka relates in his books stories from his grandfather about the honesty, simplicity and integrity of the Burmese people. His grandfather also claimed that even the rich did not have locks on their doors in the old days. And there are endless stories about Myanmar’s generous tradition of *dāna*. Morality, rest, food—all three pillars of health are so strong in the Golden Land.

While in Myanmar I visited a medical college very close to Dhamma Joti, which was another pleasant surprise. I found the teachings there to be very similar to traditional Indian medicine, and talking with students and teachers only

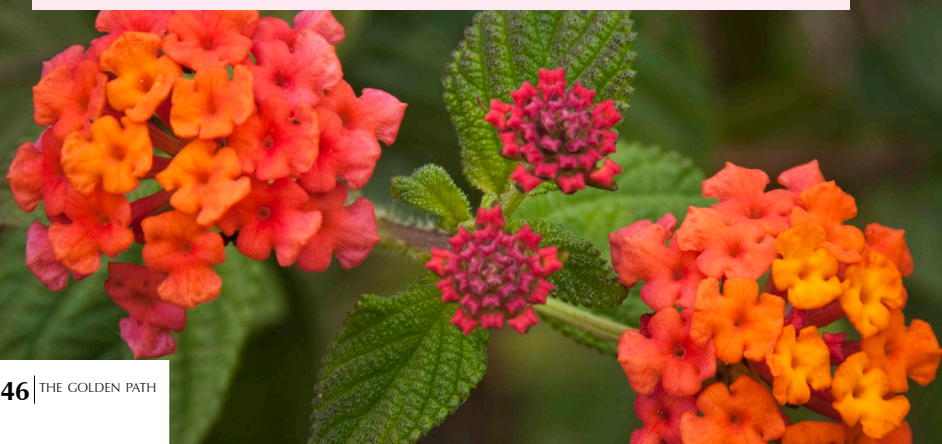
convinced me of this more. If the principles of Ayurveda are in fact influencing daily life in Myanmar, how did they reach the country, and when? The most likely answer is that ancient medical techniques arrived from India before Buddha's teachings, though I have heard it said that medicine for the body, Ayurveda, reached Myanmar at the same time as Vipassanā, medicine for the mind. Whatever the answer may be, I was so pleased to see that the wisdom of this health science has been preserved.

Ayurveda is based on the theory that matter (rūpa) is composed of five elements—earth, water, fire, wind and space—which can cause disease or bring health through the principle of cause and effect. This parallels the principles of Vipassanā. A person versed in both sciences, one for the body and the other for the mind, would experience how these two wholesome practices complement each other. In Myanmar this complementary relationship can be observed in the form of a healthy, moral society. The calmness of the people's minds and their relaxed pace of life come from being in close contact with the Buddha Sāsana. The Burmese people are in touch with their body's signals and practice the wisdom of moderation in food and rest.”

—Dr. Mehta is a Vipassanā meditator in the tradition of Sayagyi U Goenka

An Impermanent Sneeze

According to Khur-Yearn, when a Shan child sneezes while walking, either the child or the parents will say “anicca,” as Americans may say “God Bless You” or Germans say “gesundheit.”







CHAPTER 4

YOU'VE LANDED



“ One morning, as the couple paced the deck before breakfast, accompanied by Mr. Hoskins, an excited fellow traveller accosted the trio. ‘I say,’ he began, ‘have you heard? They have just signalled land ahead!’

‘Oh, where?’ cried Sophy eagerly.

‘Do you see over the starboard bow, that faint dark streak upon the sky line?’

She nodded.

‘Well then,’ he announced impressively, ‘that is Burma!’

Shafto snatched up a pair of glasses and gazed at the long line of coast and, as he gazed, he felt as if he stood upon Pisgah and a whole new world lay open before him. He was figuratively surveying the Promised Land!”

—B. M. Croker, *The Road to Mandalay* (1917)

“Late that night, or in the earliest hour of the new year, I fell asleep with my latest conscious thought, ‘We are in Burma.’”

—Julius Smith, *Ten Years in Burma*,
noting his arrival to the country in 1890.





YOU'VE LANDED

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INTRODUCTION

For most yogis, the tangible feel of arrival in the Golden Land hits as the plane taxis down the runway to a stop at the terminal after landing at Yangon's **Mingaladon International Airport**.¹ As international airports go, Mingaladon is rather calm, friendly, and small, with neither Customs nor Passport Control taking much time to clear. Many a meditator warmly recalls a first memory of seeing kind smiles upon stepping into the airport—the first of surely many to come. Travelers can change money either at the airport or later in town—thankfully, with government control over money changing, the same basic rate is now found everywhere across the city.



Some hotels arrange airport pick-up, some for free and some not. At the time of this printing, it costs between 4,000-6,000 kyat to get into the city, depending on one's destination. The touts at the entrance will try to charge a bit more. If one is arriving jet-lagged and burdened with the **large packing list** presented in Chapter 2, it may be fine to pay a higher fee and avoid the hassle. It is also possible to book ahead of time with www.ygnairportshuttle.com. Otherwise, keep smilingly suggesting a lower price, and appear confident stating your knowledge of what the standard fare should be (though note that our printed rate above may very well increase soon). If they still don't budge, walk down the ramp to the nearby road and flag a taxi—or for real budget travelers, walk towards the nearby “Mile 10” bus stop and hop aboard Bus #51 for Sule Pagoda, for just 200 kyat. Note that some airport cabs may agree to your lower fare, but then combine other passengers

1 Ironically enough, Mingaladon Airport (that which was formerly attached to an RAF base that became converted after World War II) soon became known as the most modern airport in the entire Southeast Asian region in the 1950s. However by the 1980s it became rather decrepit, leading to a major renovation in 2003, even though the city itself was not to get its own makeover until just very recently along with this.

with you, so that it takes longer to reach your hotel. As of this printing, “authorized taxi operators” can be found at the exit gate in the Arrival Hall of the airport, and accept payment in US dollars or kyat.

A smaller but growing number of travelers arrive by air via Mandalay, at the modern Italian-Thai built airport, **Tada Oo**. It’s about one hour from downtown Mandalay. Since neither city buses nor pickup trucks make this route, transportation will have to be reserved. There are usually a few taxis hanging around the airport. If reserving a vehicle while visiting important sites in and around Mandalay, consider arranging for the driver to meet you at the airport. Other options are to book ahead with Seven Diamond Express (02-22365; 32nd St, 82/83), which at the time of this printing charges either 10,000 kyat for a vehicle, or 4,000 kyat for a single person. These rates will still be less than the 10-15,000 kyat price that a typical airport taxi may charge. Air Asia flights usually offer free shuttle service. As of 2014, one can fly to Mandalay from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Singapore, and Kunming.

But whether you land at Yangon or Mandalay, once you pass through the terminal doors into the tropical air...you’ve arrived in the Golden Land!

“Looking down from the plane flying to Myanmar, I find no tall buildings and complicated highways. Instead there was just green with shiny gold dots spreading on it—big and small pagodas.”

—Chinese yogi



COMMUNICATION

- Internet and Wi-Fi
- Phone
- Post

Internet and Wi-Fi

Just a couple years ago, the internet came on a single service provider, large swathes of the online world were impossible to load in Myanmar, and Wi-Fi was unheard of. But now, there are many means of staying connected. In fact, for the yogi coming to Myanmar to develop in Dhamma, a more pressing concern may be reminding oneself to disconnect from time to time! Several public and private initiatives are now under way that aim to harness digital technology, thus allowing the country to leapfrog even to a more advanced state of development.

Cybercafés are ubiquitous in every downtown urban area, and increasingly spreading to the outlying suburbs. Prices are around 200-400 kyat per hour. *If you plan on frequenting a café repeatedly, you can save money by buying a five or ten hour card.* Although most sites connect, Gmail is by far the most popular and most convenient email provider to use. Also, with smart phones and SIM cards becoming increasingly affordable in recent years, many Burmese are skipping email altogether and using texting services. As this book was going to print, Viber seems to be the application of choice, and foreign yogis may want to download this before going.

Zombie Zapping

One of the more unfortunate results of the recent internet revolution has been the discovery of gaming by Burmese teenagers. Most often, it's intranet gaming—a network of linked-up computers in the café. It's not uncommon to leave your peaceful monastic home for a quick mail check and promptly be inundated by a dozen kids shooting zombies with virtual guns, all the while providing moment-by-moment commentary. You can use some cultural knowledge if faced with such a situation: because elders are highly respected in Myanmar, as their elder, you can nicely remind them to use their “inside voices.” Or, if one can follow the advice of a European monk, who encourages to “let them shout, if they will. Yogi should show his patience and loving-kindness by calm, mindful, and loving behavior.

In the past, when everyone had to share one of the two public servers that existed (Bagan Cybernet and the government-run option), early morning and late evening were the best times to get online. Now, timing is less important. However, internet service can be slow in Myanmar! Sometimes access to the internet as a whole works, but certain sites won't. This is one reason why it is good to have a Gmail account, since it tends to be more reliable than other mail servers here. Also, if one is faced with slow speeds, someone local may have some advice or suggestion to offer, as they will be well-acquainted with the local dynamics of Myanmar internet. Otherwise, there are several things one can try when there is slow service:

- Cybercafé workers are usually quite informed about the particular challenges of local internet, and helpful with troubleshooting options.
- Try again in a few minutes or a few hours.
- Try loading the page in “basic HTML” for faster access.
- Load the mobile version of Gmail (m.gmail.com); one can then open up individual messages in a new tab, allowing multiple loadings at once.
- If one has limited time at a café, a suggestion is to save one's text on a flash drive and read it later on a separate device.

Even these suggestions may not solve the slow connection problem. Thus, the “Gmail Offline” application can be a lifesaver in Myanmar. This is an excellent application that allows one to read and send messages more easily, even when a strong connection is not available. To make use of this, it is best to set it up prior to arriving in Myanmar, as a good internet connection is needed for the initial set-up. Another solution is to use a portable version of a Mail client (like Thunderbird) which can download your messages via the IMAP or POP3 protocol. This is an especially useful option as nowadays the IMAP/POP3 or SMTP port isn't blocked anymore in Myanmar, as it has been in the past.

Power cuts are common in Burma. Some cafés have emergency wiring so that computers stay on even with a power cut, but others do not. For this reason it's important to save messages often as one is writing them. Finally, before logging off, it's advisable to click “clear all data” from the session, avoiding the chance that stored passwords

or logins remain accessible to the next user. Similarly, it can also be helpful to enter addresses to email and social networking sites by prefacing *https*, as this is a more secure way to view the page.

In terms of Wi-Fi, not long ago, not even the most upscale establishments catering to diplomats and businessmen were able to provide Wi-Fi service. Now, one can connect just about anywhere, from bus stations to teashops to marketplaces, and even in the Shwedagon Pagoda itself.

Note: Travelers should not read the above passage detailing the advances of internet and Wi-Fi connectivity and be left with the idea that their stay in Myanmar will be greeted with high fiber optics and smooth connections on their laptops. Far from it! To those from Western as well as many Asian countries, Myanmar may still feel much slower than what one is used to. But for this country, the growth of the technology sector has been enormous, and has progressed at lightning speed, bringing many changes as a result.

Offline in Myanmar

“I first visited Myanmar in 2003. At that time, before going you had to email your family and say, ‘see you, I’ll be offline for a month.’ I didn’t see a single internet café while I was there. A few shops in Yangon had this kind of generic email address that I think was purchased from the government provider. You couldn’t access any internet, but you could send and receive single messages to specific addresses (provided you remembered them). So I wrote a long message once to my mom. They charged by length, and I paid like \$1 to send it. Then a week later, in my hotel, an envelope was delivered. When I opened it, I found my mom’s printed reply, along with a bill for another dollar.” American yogi, 2003

Tech Time

Although times are changing, it’s still not uncommon to come in contact with rural Burmese—as well as those in robes—who have not yet encountered a computer, let alone the internet or email. There is the story of a European yogi staying in a small Sagaing nunnery, and the head abbess simply could not understand her frequent and extended trips to the local cybercafé. She was not upset, but genuinely confounded that someone would continue to sit in such cramped quarters looking stressed in front of an unchanging screen, and began to wonder if there was not a problem that she might find

a way to assist. That someone seemingly without any obvious problem would choose to be by herself for so long, fixated on a machine, lay outside the nun's cultural experience. As tempting as they are, having consistent cyber connections can certainly affect one's practice in the Golden Land. Nobuko Nakana, an Australian yogi who has since ordained and is known as Sayalay Mananda Mala, commented: "From personal experience of being in constant emailing contact with the outside world, I felt this really affected my meditation and hindered my aim of really being able to meditate as deeply as what I could have. I would really recommend, if you choose to be meditating anywhere long term, I would really [keep] email/skype contact with the outside world to an absolute minimum."



Phone

- Landlines
- Mobiles
- International calls



One Western monk in Thailand commented that the advent of smart phone technology and greater Wi-Fi was, in his opinion, the greatest threat to mindfulness since the Buddha's time. Where the wild forested parts of northern Thailand once gave birth to the Thai Forest tradition, much of the trees have since been cleared, allowing for easy cell phone service and Wi-Fi access even from one's kuti.

On the other hand, teachers such as Sayadaw U Ukkamsācāra remind that, as always, "the most important thing is the *chanda* (volition or intention) of the mind." He refers to himself as a "modern monk," and believes that the teachings of the Buddha are applicable in any time and any place, with one not needing to resist modernization.

In the Buddha's day, obviously no such temptation of persistent technological distraction existed. If one wished to communicate with another, the only way to do so was to send a personal messenger with the information, given either orally or in writing. As for news, far from searching it out on Google or the latest phone app, in the Buddha's time there were drum-beaters. They would come through town announcing the latest results from a battle or the king's most recent pronouncement. And, thankfully, even a monk who had developed supernatural powers was not able to "refresh" a drum-beater each time one wished for the latest news.

■ LANDLINES

If you need to make calls within Myanmar, the charge is generally uniform whether it is within your area or to another city, or whether a landline or a mobile. Costs are often 100 kyat per minute (although more in hotels), and one is billed upon completing the call.

Telephone stands dot many streets and intersections. It might take time to recognize them for what they are, since they bear no resemblance to public phones in the West. They can take the form of a young woman sitting behind a desk with several phones on top, or a phone sitting outside of a public shop, or an enclosed booth with bright advertising and the phones sitting on the outside ledge. Or, described in slightly more descriptive language by Daniel Isaac Combs in *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*: “[In] Myanmar... calling someone required finding the appropriate woman on a street corner, where she sat under an umbrella with three or four old fashioned phones crowded onto a wooden table, all surrounded by a hodgepodge of wires that eventually snaked up a tree branch and plugging into a metal relay box attached to a nearby telephone pole.”

If one has an important call to make or plans to talk for some time, a suggestion is to first find a phone where the outside noise interference is minimal, as some streets can be extremely noisy. Also, some phone lines can have better connections than others, which is true even for those in the same general area, so it can be helpful to simply spend some time finding a good line before making a call. If there's a lot of static before even dialing the number, it should probably be taken as a sign to hunt down another connection.

Because of the challenges inherent in making calls, most businesses have several phone numbers. These are sometimes, but not always, sequential. For example, a listing of “215135 to 45” means that the numbers are 215135, 215136, 215137, 215138, etc., to 215145. If one needs to look up a number, most places have a Myanmar Yellow Pages, which can also be found online at www.myanmaryellowpages.biz.

The international telephone code for Myanmar is +95, but throughout this guide, the international code has been intentionally left out as once in-country this will not be needed. All mobile phone numbers in Myanmar begin with “09” (for example 0973505714). Additionally, all landline phone numbers include the area code, so a Yangon phone number will appear as 01-253276. As would be the case in your home country, once you are in a particular region, you would not need to dial the area code.

From within the country, a useful number that provides English-language assistance concerning government departments, embassies, airlines, and other such information is **1876**.

Telephone Ponderings

“Whose jurisdiction is it to decide whether a telephone pole needs “assistance”? [An ad-hoc solution] might be a standard practice for when those standards are breached, or it could just as easily be a once-off solution (perhaps in reaction to a particularly tall vehicle rolling through town). Then again, it may have been the work of a grid-hacker who, reflecting on the new and surprisingly short distance between the road and his appropriated power supply line, decided to act in the greater interest of vehicular and pedestrian traffic (and to perhaps keep the heat off himself while making his grid-hack/appropriation less conspicuous). Also, how then does one ad-hoc a grid repair without plentiful bamboo and soft ground? Have to get back to you on that one. Note, though, that if you want to make it more noticeable in the meantime, try a white piece of cloth draped over the offending now-low-hanging wire.” Zach Hyman, American researcher in Sagaing

What Time is It?

While most countries are in time zones at one-hour increments from GMT, Myanmar is one of the few countries that it is on the half hour. It is six hours and thirty minutes ahead of GMT, or 30 minutes behind Thailand.

MOBILES

Because the mobile phone revolution has reached Myanmar so late compared to the rest of the developing world, many Burmese still do not have phones. One Burmese monk remembers when mobile phones were introduced relatively recently to the country, and remarked that people beginning to carry mobile phones was like hanging a bell around a cow’s neck, ensuring that the person could be easily tracked by sound. Some Burmese friends might give you a phone number that you take to be their personal line, when in fact it is a public phone stand near their residence or the one phone in a village, and the person who picks up the phone will have to run and find your friend while you wait. Only ten percent of Burmese own a mobile phone, compared to eighty-seven percent in nearby Laos. By the time

this book is published, however, this number is expected to increase.

SIM cards have recently become more available. For years, they cost well over \$1500, and after some time dropped to \$250. At the time this book is going to press, they can be found as low as \$1.50 (1,500 kyat). There is no telling how this will all play out, as the story continues to make local news headlines even as this book is going to print. The good news is that most new SIM cards have not only cheap internet, but also tethering services, so you can use your phone as a Wi-Fi “hotspot” that other computers can then connect to.

International roaming is not currently available, so your SIM card from home won’t work. If your mobile phone is unlocked and can detect the MPT GSM network, you will be able to use it and can buy a \$20 SIM card when you arrive in Burma that will work for twenty-eight days. Packet data services and tethering depend on the plan and tend to not be as common or as inexpensive as those found in other Southeast Asian countries. However, in the lead-up to Myanmar hosting the 2013 Southeast Asian Games, the government began improving much of its infrastructure, including communications, so it would be worth checking websites and making inquiries prior to one’s visit to get a sense of any new changes.

“Hello?”

“Whenever I hear Myanmar people on the phone, many times they would say: ‘Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello?’ which was funny until I finally had a phone in my hand myself, with similar bad connection, and I would go ‘Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello?’”
Bhikkhu Agga, Dutch monk

INTERNATIONAL CALLS

It is quite expensive to make international calls through hotels or other landlines (upwards of \$6 per minute). So, Skype and other VoIP services are better options. It may be advisable to inquire about connection speeds prior to calling, as some cafés and Wi-Fi connections will be faster than others. The above internet-calling services are free if they are in-network, and they post the per-minute rates if calling to foreign landlines or mobiles. However, while many rates are quite reasonable, using internet calling services too much will quickly add up! Skype connections can be poor, but it’s good to remember that until recently, all such services were blocked entirely (or alternatively,

monitored). If you need to make a landline international call, you can do so at **Central Telephone and Telegraph Office** located at the corner of Pansodan and Mahabandoola Street in Yangon.

Post

The Myanmar mail system is fine if you want to send postcards to loved ones at home, but it should be avoided for sending anything of value. One's hotel can help procure postcard stamps as well as mailing the cards. For unregistered letters,



aerogrammes tend to fare better than envelopes. For something urgent to send, there are priority options, though they do not come cheaply. **EMS** (01-242566) is a Myanmar-based company; other possibilities are **DHL** (01-507471) and **Marine Transport Service**. Certified mail is recommended for sending anything of value to Myanmar from abroad.

If one is going to be in Myanmar for an extended period of time and will need to receive something important from home, there are additional options you may consider. One is to have a friend who might be coming over to Myanmar to bring it in person. Another is to arrange to have the item sent to you when you are out of the country, such as in Bangkok, Singapore, or neighboring countries with more reliable mail systems.

Sending parcels within Myanmar is very cheap, and can be done at any post office, although it is recommended not to send anything of value or that is fragile. Some foreign yogis have had packages delivered to an address of a hotel or acquaintance in a major city such as Yangon while they stay at a monastery for extended periods and a lay supporter will deliver them during their next visit. No matter how a package is sent, remember that all parcels are subject to customs inspection fees and other taxes. Also keep in mind that if one is mailing items to a monk or is oneself in robes and expecting something, the proper *vinaya* protocols still apply.

The luyone, or Special “Messenger”

In Burmese culture, there is an important concept of the *luyone* (လှူဝှံ), which has no exact equivalent in English, but can be loosely translated as “special messenger,” or “special courier.” Another alternative is “special friend,” in the sense that the *luyone* does a favor by bringing in needed items, with the expectation that the recipient would do the same for them. In a way, it’s a form of networking. The *luyone* developed in Myanmar because historically, many things have been hard to get hold of, so it became a social courtesy that when visiting abroad, the “special friend” would bring back something their friend/s and/or friends-of-friends needed. This might include medical supplies, school items, technology, personal correspondence, etc. Those in need of a *luyone* would start to inquire through various extended social networks to see if someone may know of a traveler coming to the country soon who could bring the needed item; similarly, someone coming to the country from abroad may inform local friends, and word will be passed around if something urgent is needed. Typically, the *luyone* will not be saddled with requests for very heavy or bulky items, however. Many foreign dhamma friends also follow this practice, and will send personal correspondence, gifts, and dāna with specified instructions to their friends en route there.

ACCOMMODATION

Unless one is planning to follow Webu Sayadaw’s advice that sleeping is a waste of time, securing some type of lodging will be necessary for one’s stay in Myanmar. It will not always be appropriate or possible to arrange to stay at monasteries or meditation centers. Additionally, even if one receives permission to stay at a monastery or center, one is advised to find a room at a hotel or guesthouse if one:

- is not feeling well, and/or needs time to rest.
- wants time to oneself, or wishes to read, watch movies, catch up on email, etc.
- doesn’t feel like waking up early.
- wants food throughout the day.
- has personal matters or business to attend to.
- wants quality time with a significant other.
- needs greater physical comforts for a period of time.

- wishes to do some typical tourist activities around the area.
- has health needs that complicate one's intended stay at a monastery.

Unfortunately, an unprecedented influx of tourists has recently complicated the lodging situation outside of monasteries and meditation centers. For years, hotels couldn't come close to filling their rooms, and it wasn't uncommon for plush four-star residences in premier sites to charge as low as \$50 per night. But following President Obama's 2012 visit, four star hotels are now back to charging nearly \$300 per night and taking waiting lists, while even the lowest guesthouses have doubled and even tripled their rates without making any improvements. One tour guide noted that previously, top hotels would give him an empty room with all the amenities out of gratitude for bringing tourists there. Now, they send him quickly on his way, and sometimes even the tourists he's shepherding around as well! Despite massive construction projects now underway, real estate insiders expect the hotel shortage to remain for the next decade. This situation will worsen if a new road or train line opens up to allow an easier border crossing into Myanmar from neighboring countries. This is all a long way of saying: "*Make reservations!*" especially during the high season of October to February.

Most hotels will allow one to leave baggage with them if one wants to travel, or is staying for an extended time at a monastery. Most also have a noon check-out time, although it may be possible to stay an hour or two longer (but with the recent tourist boom, this may be less likely). If you wish to stay for an extended period, most hotels and guesthouses will give you a lower rate.

An alternative is to look into renting a local apartment. This is not nearly as easy as it is in neighboring Asian countries, and the help of a good friend or two will be needed. But one may decide that it's worth the effort.

Note: As this edition goes to print, it is not legal for foreigners to stay overnight at the homes of Burmese.

A word about the rationale for the choice of accommodations covered in this guide: One goal of *Shwe Lan* is to help yogis and other travelers fill in the spaces between the obvious in Myanmar. Therefore, top-end and mid-range lodging options



are not included, as they are “the obvious” for many travelers to Myanmar, and such information is readily available in a standard guidebook. However, fewer yogis choose to stay at higher-end lodgings, so this information is less necessary in a book like this. Second, moreover, those looking for rooms at a higher price range can generally be secure in obtaining the level of comfort they are looking no matter what lodging they end up with, while choices within a similar price range for cheaper lodgings can yield much more varied experiences. *Shwe Lan* therefore focuses on guesthouse options, and describes them particularly with the needs of a meditator in mind. We consider such features as location, proximity to sites conducive for practice, background of owners, guests and clientele, attitude towards meditators, availability of alcohol, etc. Second, our listings are not meant to be comprehensive, as our primary intention is to provide more specified insights than the standard guides that focus on tourists.

For more frugal travelers, the general categories of lodgings are:

- **Backpacker-type lodgings:** While these facilities can be quite easy-going, they see a high turnover and get the South-East-Asia-On-A-Shoestring crowd. This may involve having to bear a lot of backpacker talk, (such as about the worst noodle shop in Bagan or the heroic attempts to avoid being cheated in Inle) and likely a fair share of cigarette smoke and beer drinking. On the plus side, it’s easy to get good travel advice and help with logistics.
- **Family run guesthouses:** These can be a real treat, as they include just a half-dozen rooms and the family stays in the compound as well. Especially when the family finds out your reasons for visiting, this can be a chance to make some local friends and learn about further Buddhist sites and opportunities that are not covered in this guide (and for those sites that may be appropriate for further yogis to learn about, do share with us!). Note that family run guesthouses can be rather simple, and while they were quite affordable before the housing boom, now they demand much higher prices.
- **Chinese-style concrete blocks:** These are less common in Yangon than upcountry. They usually feature small, non-descript rooms, many on a floor, with narrow hallways and little character. They are adequate for short stays, although the tourist boom has also made these a bit overpriced lately.
- **Burmese-type hostels:** These are often where Burmese guests may choose to stay when traveling, although many would choose



the home of a family or friend, or a monastery, as a first option. Be aware that some of these do not have proper licensing to allow foreign guests.

When choosing one's lodgings, the wonderful Indian pilgrimage guide, *Along the Path*, recommends that one considers:

- Price: What's your budget?
- Cleanliness: Can you live with cockroaches?
- Quiet: Do you mind roaring diesel engines or blaring music?
- **Bathroom:** Can you share a toilet with strangers?
- **Bathing:** Do you need hot water to bathe? Do you need a proper shower?
- Spaciousness: Do you need space for stretching or for laying out your things?
- And any other unique quirks...

Help Us Help You!

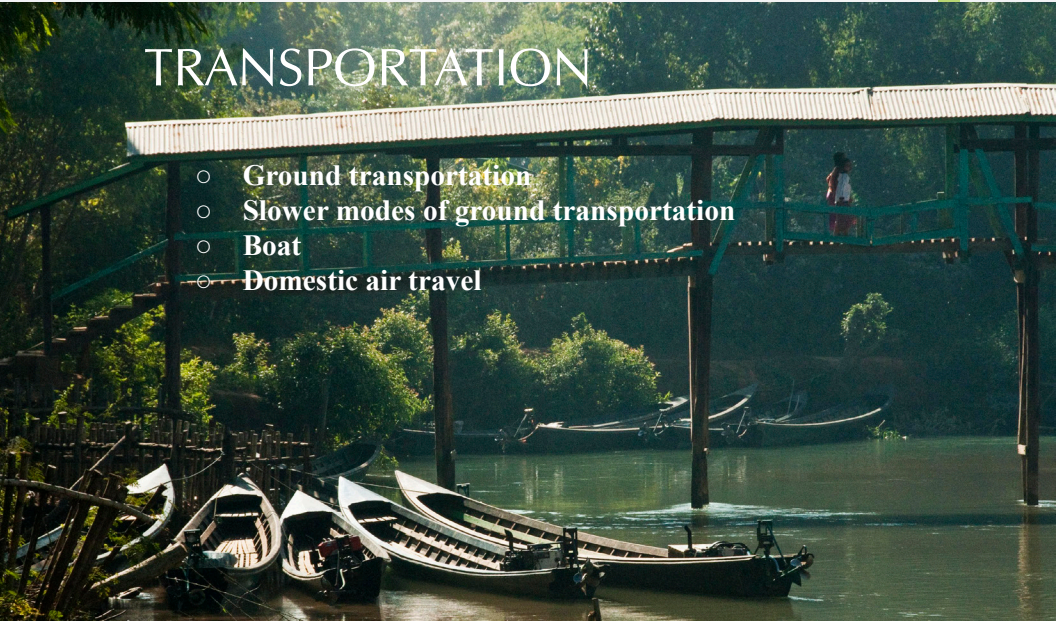
In various towns and cities throughout Myanmar, we have only listed those guesthouses where contributors or yogis have actually stayed. In addition, the information included in the entry is often just meditator-related, such as its proximity to a temple, noise factors, presence of intoxicants, and Buddhist background of the staff, where applicable. For mundane information, like the quality of the beds or presence of hot water, readers are advised to refer to a standard guidebook. **We'd like your help in making future editions of *Shwe Lan* an even more valuable resource for the foreign yogi in Myanmar! If any of you stay at good accommodations that are unlisted in *Shwe Lan*, or have additional information about a listed site to share with us, email us at burmadhamma@gmail.com to share your experience.**

Laundry Services

In Myanmar, there are few independent laundry services. However, most hotels and guesthouses will wash clothes for a fee of around 100 kyat per item; ironing may be slightly more. If something needs to be hand-washed or handled with care, make sure to explain that to the manager beforehand. If something needs pressing or dry-cleaning (such as formal clothes or a woolen shawl), there are professional shops, and the cost is quite reasonable. For more information about doing your laundry at meditation centers or monasteries, refer to upcoming Chapter 7.4.

TRANSPORTATION

- Ground transportation
- Slower modes of ground transportation
- Boat
- Domestic air travel



ရုန်းနိုင်မှ ချောင်း ကျော်
you~: nai~ hma, chau~: cō
 “As quickly as the oxen can travel,
 the far bank will be reached.”



“If I am invited to go to a certain place, then I practice mettā meditation for about one or two days before I have to leave. I generate mettā for the beings who live in places on the way and for those who live at my journey’s destination, as well as those who may attend my dhamma talks. Also, while I am travelling, I practice mettā meditation.”

Sayadaw U Indaka, *Mettā: The Practice of Loving-Kindness as the Foundation for Insight Meditation Practice*

It is not the intent of this guidebook to give comprehensive travel information for all transit options connecting all cities and sites. As is the case for lodging, yogis are encouraged to also travel with a standard guidebook. For the purposes of this book, the priority is two-fold: (1) giving specific information to those sites that may be of interest to meditators often when important information is not otherwise available and (2) offering general ideas about travel options and possibilities within a certain area, such as when planning a *yatra*.

Burmese themselves often travel primarily for religious intent, such as to pay respects to a noted Sayadaw or pagoda or to share in someone's merit when performing a wholesome deed, or to visit their native village.

Travel through the Dry Zone (the Bamar regions connecting Yangon and Mandalay and beyond) can be monotonous and repetitive, yet increasingly more comfortable for those who can afford it. Travel to outlying territories is more of an adventure, not only in what one will experience but also in how one will experience it.

There are three basic travel options: plane, bus, and private or shared (chauffeur-driven) car. In some places, there are trains (although they are usually poorly maintained and uncomfortable) or boats (which are usually either high luxury for top-end tourists, or local, slow and not always safe). Hitchhiking is uncommon in Myanmar and not recommended, and it is also very rare for visitors to rent and drive their own car.

Deciding between a plane, bus, or car will depend on your origin and destination. Private or shared cars (with driver included) can be either more or less than plane travel, as the costs will be entirely dependent on the route, type of car, and number of passengers. Again, a standard guidebook will help when making such logistical decisions.

Meditators going to secluded monasteries should inquire of the monks and lay supporters about the best way to get there, as some are difficult to reach. While road construction and repair has expanded throughout the country, even the most traveled stretches of roads will have their share of bumpy spots. Several years ago, an American monk went home for a visit after some time at Pa Auk Monastery, and noted that “the first new experience was how smooth the American roads are. It is difficult for a Myanmar person to imagine travelling more than sixty-five miles in one hour. Back in Myanmar, you are lucky if you can do that in two or three hours! On the other hand, [my Burmese monk friend] did not know about American highway traffic.”

Being Prepared

“Burmese travelers always carry loads of food when they travel, as if they were going to cross the Sahara, and their friends make sure that they will never starve to death even if they are only going on an hour’s drive.” Ma Thanegi, *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*

Taking Care of Oneself

Foreign yogis should always keep in mind that the climate in Myanmar is **hot**, humid and can be quite draining. So being intentional about maintaining one’s health is key. While normal fatigue can be easily brushed aside in more temperate climates, here it can have much more serious consequences, especially for those not accustomed to the conditions. As regards travel, this intentionality may translate into paying more for comfort and air-conditioning, and making sure to bring plenty of drinking water, electrolytes, and fresh fruits on long trips, as well as arranging for a bus with a toilet so one can stay properly hydrated. For more information on maintaining health in Myanmar, see [here](#).



GROUND TRANSPORTATION

- Motor vehicles
- Private car and driver
- Taxis
- Motorbikes and scooters
- Motorcycle taxis
- Pick-up Trucks and “Line Cars”
- Buses
 - Yangon inner-city buses
 - Domestic travel buses
- Train

In Myanmar, there are a wide variety of possibilities for ground transportation, some of which may be new to travelers making their first trip to this part of the world. This section is designed to famil-

iarize *Shwe Lan* readers with the overall context of transportation in Myanmar.

There are a couple of important things to keep in mind. Many foreign yogis wonder about the best way to make their domestic travel arrangements. Should one plan in advance and make reservations, or simply show up and manage to get around once in country? One thing to be aware of in this regard is that the recent major tourist boom means not only that prices of hotels and transportation have increased, but also that availability is less certain these days, particularly during the high season of October through February. Planning ahead during this time is recommended.

A second important variable in making one's plans is that getting outside the main tourist track (which also happens to be where many of the rural monasteries are located) can involve minimal infrastructure and limited exposure to English-speaking help. Even experienced travelers in India and Southeast Asia have reported challenging times navigating rural Myanmar. In short, *Shwe Lan's* recommendation is as follows: if one is going to a single site, has ample time (e.g., on a the three-month meditation visa), or sees the travel itself as a central part of the experience and adventure, then a do-it-yourself trip may be in order. But if one is hoping to stay on schedule by seeing many sites in a short period of time, is undertaking a yatra, has health issues, or hopes for relatively seamless travel, then it is recommended to go through an agency. Note that specific agencies and guides are suggested in relevant sections of *Shwe Lan*.

Monks Ride for Free...Or Not, as the Case May Be

In a Buddhist country such as Myanmar, monks are given some extra care on public transportation. In addition to ensuring a seat for them, one also makes sure that they will not be next to a woman. However, each transport has a slightly different protocol. For **buses**, monks may “confess” to the driver that they don’t handle money, at which point the driver will invite the monk on board. However, because public buses can get quite crowded, some monks refuse to ride them as accidentally touching women may occur. **Public trains** and **boats** may also be complimentary, however **motorbikes**, **planes**, and **taxis** will often charge standard fares. Finally, monks are to avoid **rickshaws**, **ox-carts**, and other vehicles that are considered largely dependable on animal or human effort because of vinaya.

However, vehicles dependent on mechanical engines such as cars were allowed by the Sixth Buddhist Council, providing a fascinating insight into how ancient monastic discipline has intersected with modern reality. As motorized buses became more popular in the first half of the 20th century, this became very much a work in progress: according to Michael Mendelson in *Sangha and State in Burma*, some bus companies offered up just two free seats to monks, while others only to those collecting morning food; some provided no free seating at all, and yet others intentionally stopped the bus just ahead of or behind monks to avoid the issue altogether! One monastic group known as the Sangha Party took up the issue, although in the end simply concluded that monks should, at least temporarily, just pay the fares.

MOTOR VEHICLES



“Our many drivers sped through little towns with surprising speed, given how incoherent the traffic appeared to me. However everyone seemed to know to give cars the right of way, even the chickens, pigs and water buffalo.”

Through the Looking Glass, John Dinsmore/Bhikkhu Cintita

In the not-so-distant past, Myanmar was a car-lover’s dream. Because it was so difficult for new automobiles to enter the country, cars that in any other place would have been forced off the road continued, somehow, in service. In addition to models and makes that are rarely seen any more in the twenty-first century, there was also a delightful profusion of cars that seemed to be banded together on a wish, a prayer, and a few strips of duct tape. Only a few years ago, a taxi ride could commonly include windows that didn’t roll up during rainy season or down in hot season, upholstery stuffed with old longyis, lawn chairs set for passenger use, and large gaping holes in the floorboard that made you wonder; reminiscent of an old *Flintstones* cartoon. Additionally, many Burmese cars are right-hand

drives, but they drive on the right side of the road (a move made in the 1970s to further disassociate with its colonial past). This makes life increasingly difficult for the driver hoping to pass an overloaded truck on a small winding road.

Like so much of the rest of Burmese society, this situation, too, is in flux, transitioning almost before one's eyes. Not long ago one could look in all directions and barely spot a car made within the last five years; now one can hardly spot a car that is *older* than five years (indeed, vehicles older than thirty years were recently taken off the roads en masse, and their final resting place—a mass rusting car graveyard—can be seen from the windows of Yangon's circle train). Today, new car lots litter the cities, streets are clogged with never-before-seen congestion, and accidents are more common. The change has come in such a flurry that while stuck in a traffic jam, you can look around and see a half dozen windowpanes that still have the chalk-marked price on them. Similarly, while gas used to be available only at road-side stands and was sold in plastic jugs and old whiskey bottles (and could involve hour-long waits), there are now modern gas stations cropping up throughout the country.

Traffic Colors

You can tell a lot by looking at the color of a Burmese license plate: black plates are standard privately-owned cars, red are for-hire buses and taxis, white are for diplomats, and yellow for monasteries.

PRIVATE CAR AND DRIVER

For yogis, private cars and vans with drivers can be useful when trying to see multiple sites around Yangon and Mandalay, especially if you are traveling with others where the costs can be shared. By requesting a car with fewer amenities, the price can end up being quite affordable. And if you really wish to travel in comfort, a modern, air-conditioned private car is the way to go.

Private cars can be reserved either for inner-city travel, or for an extended period, such as if one is traveling from one region to another. However, they are not recommended for longer trips, as the prices will be extremely high. A flight or bus are better options. However, when



your destination has no flight connection available (such as Mandalay-Hsipaw), a private car may be worth considering. Finally, if one is concerned about safety, it's possible to “test” the car and driver with a fifteen-minute drive around the area before formally contracting the car and driver. For those wishing to reserve a car and driver for any portion of your trip to Myanmar, you can ask at your hotel or review a standard guidebook. For Buddhist-specific trips, **Muditā Work** may be best for your needs.

Important: *renting a car to drive yourself is **not** recommended, as the penalties for accidents are quite severe.*

The Polite Burmese Driver

For those of us that come from places where driving tends to be aggressive and self-centered, it's interesting to see how Burmese will sometimes work to help their fellow drivers, especially in the countryside. For example, it is considered common courtesy for slower vehicles in front to signal smaller cars in back when it is safe to pass with a wave of the hand or a blinking taillight.

TAXIS

If you are tired, too hot, or just generally overwhelmed, taxis can be a much better option than a bus. Sometimes even standing on a busy, smoggy, hot and humid street corner while trying to flag a taxi can be exhausting; in this case one can ask a hotel or restaurant to call a cab for you. It may end up costing slightly more, but it's usually worth the extra price to conserve one's energy for more important matters. Similarly, if the heat is too much, make sure to request a taxi with air conditioning.

Taxis are one of the best ways to get around Yangon in particular, as they are readily available and affordable here. However, they are not as common—or inexpensive—in other cities. They rarely go outside the city limits; for that, one hires a private car and driver. The typical Yangon taxi is white with black writing on the side listing its number, and a standard *taxi* sign on the hood, often a Toyota Corolla. These days, new imports are becoming the norm. The compact, Korean-made *Kia* is quite common, with its straight backseat and minimal leg room. The new *Kia* models tend to come in blistering bright greens, blues, and reds, while Toyota taxis are often white.

All taxis have a panel in the cab that lists the driver's name and photo. Most have meters, although they are never (literally) used. For this reason, all fares need to be negotiated before getting in. Foreigners might be charged a slightly higher price (perhaps 1000 kyat more), though more serious scams are uncommon. Still, it's good to be prepared, and it's perfectly acceptable to try to negotiate a fare, and pass if the driver won't come down. To get an idea of how much a fare "should" cost, inquire at any nearby hotel or restaurant. Otherwise, one can ask a few different drivers to compare prices. Generally, unless you are going outside of the city center, you will rarely have to pay more than 3000 kyat. If you end up liking your driver or feel he has gone above and beyond the call of duty, one can leave a small tip, but this is not required. Taxis can also be rented hourly (for about 5000-6000 kyat) or daily (40,000 to 50,000 kyat, although may be more depending on the route).

Many taxi drivers sit idle by places frequented by potential customers, such as hotels, restaurants, pagodas, and airports, since they are assured a steady stream of business. The cost for these taxis will always be higher than one flagged off the street. This is because these drivers often don't feel much incentive to get going—they are enjoying being with their buddies and if you don't take their higher fare request, they can go back to a few more minutes of betel chewing before the next potential customer comes along. When you do try to flag down a taxi, be aware that taxis are not permitted by law to stop on some stretches of roads, particularly bus thoroughfares and large roundabouts. If a taxi driver lifts his hand out the window and shakes it from side to side, it means he is not free to pick you up.

Many taxi drivers do not speak any English. For this reason, it's helpful if you can have the place you're going written in Burmese script, as pronunciation can be a hindrance to communication. Some drivers will just drive on even if they have no idea where you want to go—occasionally asking a passerby if they know what you're talking about. So making sure your destination is understood before you get



in is important. That being said, most taxi drivers are fairly honest, and after paying the daily rent charges for the cabs (usually 15,000 kyat per day) and gasoline costs, have only minimal profit leftover. They'll do their best to get you where you want to go...but it certainly won't hurt to take the above precautions!

Classic justifications heard by Yangon taxi drivers as to why a higher fare is necessary:

- "The streets where you want to go are really clogged now."
- "The price of gas has just increased."
- "But now it's morning/afternoon/evening, and costs are higher in this time of day."
- "I won't be able to get an easy return fare from there."
- "There are two/three/four of you."
- "There is only one of you."

Just as taxi drivers may have their perfectly legitimate reason why a higher fare is justified, you can prepare your clever retort. Just remember not to lose your cool: Burmese negotiating is always a pleasant and friendly affair!

Burmese Kindness

All over the world, local folks can be very helpful to foreigners, and indeed, discovering generosity and kindness in foreign cultures is one of the real joys of travel. Visitors to Myanmar are often surprised by the extent to which Burmese offer their assistance, and this can often manifest when asking for directions. It seems to be standard practice for Burmese drivers to lean out their window and ask for directions from anyone who happens to be within earshot, whether it is a fellow driver, a pedestrian or a shop owner, who will then enthusiastically crowd the car with whoever else happens to be around to offer their help.

Such offers of aid will come even more so to the foreigner, and most of all for the foreign yogi, as many Burmese Buddhists are overjoyed that one is coming for the noble pursuit of Dhamma practice. Some yogis have reported stories of locals joining them for days of travel to locate a remote monastery or staying on at a monastery for an additional week to care for them during a self-meditation retreat. It sometimes holds true even when securing a taxi, as Italian meditator Enrico Billi found out: "One time I was needing [a] few **kyats** to pay the taxi and [a] lady offered to pay the fee herself, as a donation for my meditation! That day I understood that the accumulation of merits for them is not a belief: it's a reality just as the gravity law."

MOTORBIKES AND SCOOTERS

While these are commonly rented to foreigners throughout most of Southeast Asia, there are very few—if any—such shops that cater to tourists here. Motorbikes are in fact prohibited throughout all of Yangon, although Mandalay seems to more than make up for this restriction and is known as the “city of bikes.” Recently there has also been an influx of new, inexpensive Chinese models that have been flooding the markets. Some tourist agencies have started to very tentatively explore limited motorbike tours in parts of Myanmar, but this has not yet been tried and tested. While foreigners are known to frequently rent motorbikes and travel extensively throughout places like Thailand and India, one should not plan on traveling like this in Myanmar without extensive research into the possibilities, even on those roads where foreigners are permitted.



MOTORCYCLE TAXIS



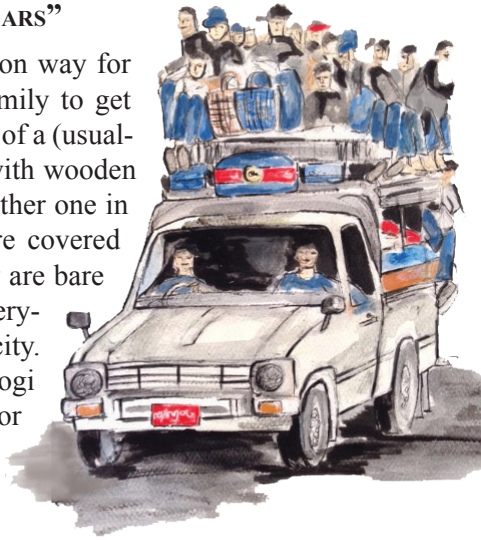
Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, there are few inner-city motorcycle taxis. In fact, no motorcycles of any kind are allowed in Yangon, while three-wheeled transport (such as the “tuk-tuk”, as it is known in Thailand) is common only in certain areas. The one place motorcycle taxis do operate is at the end of rural bus routes, where a monastery or village may still be

several miles farther. Motorcycle taxi drivers don’t wear any specific clothing or have any signs on their bike that identifies them as such, but they’ll be obvious—waiting around bus stops and boat jetties, looking for customers. Motorcycle taxi drivers have been known to request inflated fares of foreigners, so one should be wary before agreeing on a price. Some yogis will ask the monks upon reaching the monastery what the fair price should be, and offer to pay that amount. One can also ask nearby shop owners with the help of the glossary in this guidebook and a pocket Burmese-English dictionary.

Note that the cost of motorcycle taxis that go to specific sites are listed in the corresponding regional chapters, reflect *Shwe Lan's* inquiries at the time. So these listed prices are best treated as approximations, as they may have changed since.

■ PICK-UP TRUCKS AND “LINE CARS”

This is perhaps the most common way for a group of Burmese friends and family to get around: cram everyone into the back of a (usually white Toyota) pickup furnished with wooden benches on each side, and often another one in the middle. Sometimes the seats are covered with a thin cushion, but mostly they are bare wood. Such vehicles are found everywhere in towns and throughout the city. They can also be helpful to the yogi where private cars are unavailable or exorbitantly expensive. Pickups can also be hired by a group to reach a local pilgrimage site, and will not be nearly as costly as a private sedan or van.



Public pickups are used as alternatives to city buses, but given how crowded they can get, they aren't suggested for the faint of heart. Many will idle for quite some time in the hot sun, as the operators do not want to take off until they have packed them as full as possible. One can pay slightly more to sit in the front seat. It's good to have a number of small bills for these situations because many drivers won't be able to give change. Pick your poison when choosing a seat: standing with Burmese men on the backside affords air and space, but you end up hanging on for dear life; sitting in the enclosed area will keep you stable, but provide little air and heat up quickly; and seats outside the enclosure keeps the claustrophobia at bay but may involve a heavy degree of shuffling around as people get on and off.

Between a pickup and a city bus is the “line car.” These are basically mini-buses with 32 seats that traverse similar city routes as the bus lines. They are usually slightly cheaper, although also more crowded. For a real Burmese experience, stand on the back platform with a single hand on the iron crossbar and a foot hanging off, all the

while making sure that one's longyi stays intact! Even among line-car fares there are options: a seat up front next to the driver will be slightly more, and one leg hanging off the back tail-end will save you a few kyat.

One foreign visitor described the experience as such: “What had seemed like a fun local experience initially was extremely painful. There were at least thirty of us squeezed into the back of this vehicle and every time you thought it was full, more people were somehow crammed in. As the truck bumped along the dusty roads, we were all thrown about as much as you could be when there was little space to be thrown into. I had a woman's knees between my legs, a boy's shoulder in my face and an unfortunate man's back under my sweaty right armpit.”

BUSES

Tight Spaces

“Mass transportation had been the most jarring aspect of coming to Myanmar. The throng. The sweat. The panicky condensing of myself [sic]. On a city bus in Yangon, I had been forced to throw my backpack out the window, and then, a block later, while the bus was still moving, throw myself out another and sprint back to find my belongings, simply because there was no way to get to the front door.” Daniel Isaac Combs, *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*

Yangon inner-city buses

Yangon is really the only city in Myanmar big enough to require its own fleet of buses. Yangon's buses are Japanese throwbacks (and most with the Japanese advertisements and safety information still in place) that barrel forward awkwardly, lunging and shifting aggressively down the busy Yangon streets. As one Japanese visitor commented, “I would say that more than ninety percent of the buses running in Myanmar are second-hand buses from Japan. A Japanese bus with its original route signs was waiting for us after getting off the plane, it was so interesting. I even had the illusion that I was back in Japan.”

On a typical bus, passengers will be sitting closely together, with space in the front always found for monks and novices, and with Buddhist posters affixed to the window above the driver. Monks usually are given seats near the front, and women make sure not to sit beside

them or stand too close if no further seating is available. Several betel-chewing attendants will be circulating around inside, calling out the bus route to attract new customers, although the bus will never actually stop completely to allow someone on or off, but just come to a slow rolling “stop” where people scramble to jump on and off to the urgent cries of the attendants. Their black smoke and noisy engines do not make for the most pleasant of experiences during Yangon’s increasing traffic jams. But the good news: Yangon’s buses are plentiful, regular, and above all else, dirt cheap; rides taking up to one to two hours cost little more than 200 kyat. Finally, since bus numbers are written in Burmese script, it will be helpful to have the number of the route one needs written down in Burmese.

Buses are cheap and convenient for yogis staying just outside of Yangon. If one needs to leave one’s monastery periodically, buses can be very handy.

Domestic Travel Buses

Regional bus lines (and to a lesser extent, the roads they travel on) have received a major upgrade in the past several years, as there has been an increase in companies that aim for a higher level of luxury, with only slight increases in price. As recently as 2013, new “VIP” services have sprung up connecting such towns as Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan, Taunggyi, Inle and others, with brand new, more comfortable Swedish and German-made vehicles that have gone on to replace many of the second-hand Japanese buses. Bus attendants serve snacks and water, there is more leg room and reclining range, and allow for a better night’s sleep. On the downside, they still test your equanimity with constant Burmese music videos and bad comedy movies. And, although clean blankets are distributed to passengers on most VIP lines, they keep the air conditioning on frigid through most of the ride. Finally, it should be noted that these buses are *not* a nice way to “see the country,” since most of the highways that these buses travel on are rather boring and nondescript. But on balance, it’s a comfortable, fairly inexpensive mode of transportation to go longer distances.

One can certainly decline the VIP options and choose normal first-class to save a few extra kyat, and for a real Burmese experience, one can save even more by riding local buses. These will likely be filled with large rice stacks and other products that are set in the aisles and on the roof, and may have live animals as well, such as chickens or

peacocks. In her travels as detailed in *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy* (2011), Ma Thanegi noted how (during the 1990s) some of these buses were “pre-World War II Chevrolets, with large holes in the dusty, grimy wooden flooring, their gear sticks long replaced with wooden two-by-fours.” Times have changed since these lines were written and even third-class travel has improved. Most regional bus routes have schedules that run in the day and night. The roads won’t necessarily be less crowded at night as they’d be in other countries, as many people prefer to travel during the evening, either to avoid wasting daylight (working) hours or to prevent their vehicles from overheating under the intense Burmese sun.

From Yangon, most regional buses leave from **Mingaladon** terminal, a chaotic dust-storm of a place with large buses jockeying for position. It is located in the far north of Yangon and a taxi from downtown to the terminal can cost as much as the entire bus trip! *Recommendation: get your tickets a few days in advance, and up to a week if you want your choice of seating.* Tickets are available at **Mingaladon** itself, but don’t go there just for that purpose, since it is a long trip. If you are already downtown, you can get tickets at many travel agencies, and many bus companies have offices near **Bogyoke Aung San Stadium**. Hotels may also book them for you, but be aware that some include hefty surcharges for that service. On some bus lines, foreigners have to pay a slightly higher fee. Once you check in, you’ll be asked to show your passport, and they’ll give you luggage tags for any bags you wish to stow away before the trip. To review bus schedules, see this site: <http://www.ycdc.gov.mm/>

Long Bus Travel tips:

- On cheaper buses, avoid the seats over the tire and the extra jump seats set in the aisle if the bus reaches past capacity.
- Because some buses have extreme air conditioning, make sure to keep warm clothes with you.
- If you are susceptible to nausea, bring what medicine you need. Some folks prone to car sickness note that the front of the bus can be more comfortable than the rear.
- Unless you are interested in poorly produced, blaringly loud Burmese movies, you’ll be happy if you brought along earphones and your own entertainment, Dhammic or otherwise.
- Wear your **money belt** and keep your important items close.

Make sure to take your valuables with you when the bus stops for a break.

- Most buses will serve water, and stop every few hours at rest stops for food breaks. However, it's not a bad idea to bring additional water and your favorite snacks.
- Pay more if you want to make sure there is a **bathroom** on board. If not, and it is an emergency, they will sometimes stop on the side of the road if you request (but not always—look pitiful if they need convincing).
- If there is no toilet on the bus, try to hit the facilities just before the bus leaves whether you feel like you need to or not. Similarly, get off the bus whenever it stops to try again. You don't know when the next bathroom break will be.
- Make sure you are clear on how long the bus is stopping during breaks, so you won't be left behind. It also helps to make personal connections with the driver, attendant, or a fellow passenger, so you might be remembered if the bus starts to pull away. Make sure you look for defining features on your bus as well as its specific number, as many food breaks have vast parking lots with many dozens of buses.
- Aside from earplugs, an eye-mask makes for a wonderful travel companion on a Burmese bus.

Burmese Bus Stations

A Myanmar bus station can be an interesting place to spend time. As Daniel Isaac Combs writes in *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*, “the Yangon bus station had the feel of an intimidating dusty bazaar, filled with diesel fumes and sand. It was an enormous makeshift community with its own affable avenues and ignorable slums. There were nice restaurants, run down bars, mobile phone stores and roving booksellers.” There is also a vast array of stalls selling all sorts of goods. One can stock up on useful items for one's upcoming journey, or grab ready-made gifts for friends back home. Zach Hyman, an American researcher who has chronicled much of the street stall culture in Yangon, notes that “bus stops are not merely for waiting for the bus, but also for providing shelter for sidewalk/street-based businesses, in the same way that many of Yangon's sidewalks are not intended solely for walking, but as (semi-public) commercial spaces available for rent.”

TRAIN

In the minds of many first-time visitors, one of the archetypical romanticized images of Myanmar is a sepia-toned picture of a locomotive winding its way through rice paddies with views of gleaming pagodas off to the horizon. However, this romantic view does not correspond with present day realities. The reality is buckling tracks laid during the British Raj, carriages trying to avoid a breakdown, all the while filled with people, animals, and vendors, and only a hard steel or wooden bench for those lucky enough not be standing. They break down often, lose electricity, have poor sanitation, and tickets for foreigners can sometimes run quite high. In short, even though some limited models have been brought in from China since 2006, the changes that have started to come to Myanmar's roads and vehicles have barely touched the country's 3,126 miles of rails.

Italian yogi Enrico Billi, who took the train from Yangon to Monywa, remembers that “the travel was quite an adventure: sometimes the train was jumping so much that I feared that it would finish off the track,” and Thant Myint U notes in *Where China Meets India* that “train journeys in Burma are slow, unreliable, and either hot and stuffy or air-conditioned and near freezing.” All in all, as is commonly heard in Myanmar, Burmese trains are “not as bad as you think, but also not as good as you might have hoped.”

Some train lines are in better shape than others, and most have a limited number of first-class cabins available. Some Burmese train routes can be quite scenic. Mandalay to Pyin Oo Lwin, with its hairpin turns and view of the **Goteik Bridge**, is said to be one of the more picturesque journeys, and travel to **Mawlamyine** will take you on the century-old British tracks. For more extensive information on train journeys, consult a standard travel guide.

An interesting and short train option is the **Circle Train**. For the cost of one dollar (requested in US currency but kyat may be accepted if none is available), you can take a three-hour loop that goes out of Yangon, through the suburbs and rice fields as the dry zone begins, and back again into Yangon. It's a kaleidoscope of views to behold, with characters getting on and off at various places along the journey,



although it's not always the most comfortable. Trains leave from Platform Four and Seven several times daily, and you can ride either clockwise or counterclockwise.

The Rangoon to Mandalay Express

"When I was growing up and visiting Burma on holidays with my family, we would often take the train from Rangoon to Mandalay. The trains were old diesel trains with hard wooden seats, the windows kept open to let in the breeze. And from the windows we could see the villages in the distance, villages that looked like islands of tall trees, the little bamboo and wooden houses barely visible as we passed by, clusters of dark green set here and there amongst the fields. At the different stops men and women in faded longyi's crowded beneath the windows to try and sell snacks and cups of tea and we would sometimes buy a simple dish, like biryani rice served on a banana leaf. It took at least fourteen hours to travel the 500 miles inland to Mandalay, but there must have been even slower trains, as the one we always took was called 'The Mandalay Express.'" Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India*

Slower Modes of Ground Transportation

- Bicycle Rickshaws
- Bicycles
- Ox or horse carts
- Tractors
- Going on foot

BICYCLE RICKSHAWS

These can be found in quiet corners of cities and in every village. They won't be able to take you very far (especially in Yangon) because they can't traverse some of the busier thoroughfares, but they make for an enjoyable trip, and sometimes the drivers know peaceful shortcuts and side-streets that the bigger cars can't or don't follow. Most are equipped with both a front and a back seat in which two passengers sit back to back.

BICYCLES

Bikes can be rented in several towns by the day, including Mandalay, Bagan, and around the outskirts of Inle. Information about extended bike tours can be found in standard Myanmar guidebooks, or by looking online. Note that biking at night is discouraged in Mandalay because of all the traffic, and in big tourist destinations such as Bagan because of theft.



OX OR HORSE CARTS

This is how many farmers get around. If one is out in a village, it's possible to get a ride on these. They are not usually used as a ferry service, except in Pyin Oo Lwin and Bagan, where they are especially done up for tourists. Patricia Elliott, in her biography of the Yawnghwe (Nyaungshwe in Burmese) Mahadevi Sao Hearn Hkam, recounts in *The White Umbrella* that in days long ago in the Shan states, "To survive the jolts of a bullock car ride you had to sit just so in the center, swaying lightly to the cart's movements, outstretched hands resting on the cart's high sides." Yogis can try this technique and compare the results as they travel across rural Shan country roads leading to their monastery of practice. The Shan writer Sao Sanda adds to this description in *The Moon Princess*, writing that in older times even this type of transport was only for those that could afford it, with most villagers walking from village to village on foot, and avoiding the tigers and panthers that roamed just off-trail. When the British came, however, the creaky noise of the wooden oxen carts upset their sensibilities, and a Deputy Commissioner once made a law that any cart entering his town was prohibited from creaking. Thus, Burmese travelers came to carry a small pot of oil with them, and applied it on the wheels when just before his house.



■ TRACTORS

Noisier than a rock concert, bouncier than a trampoline, dirtier than a smoggy day, and slower than a light jog. But, for the adventuresome... why not? Like ox-carts they do not generally travel further than the next village, although many may be willing to provide a short lift.

■ GOING ON FOOT

There are many places in Myanmar where the best way to get around is **by foot**, from hillside trails carved into the Sagaing Hills, to backstreet paths that cut across Yangon congestions and noise, to the joy of following on an alms round. If one has certain needs or preferences for footwear, it's best to bring what will keep you comfortable in a hot, humid, and rainy climate. While these are available in Myanmar,



international brands and larger sizes can be hard to find. Alternatively, if you assist in following an alms round and collecting leftover foods, it is required to be barefoot, as it is when giving to monks on alms rounds as well. If you plan to go trekking for several days, you should bring your own boots, as well as any orthotics, medicines, etc.

Whenever one is walking around, even if just for very short distances, do take care: ***Pedestrians do not have the right-of-way in Myanmar, and it is their job to watch out for moving traffic, not the other way around.*** Burmese drivers do not show the same level

of courtesy towards pedestrians as they do towards other drivers! Sidewalks are often broken or blocked (and with dangerous gaping holes found in some of them), and mismatched pavement can mean sharp slabs or even wrought iron sticking up, as well as open drains. Local city dwellers tend to walk on the outer edges, or even in the street, during evenings, and bringing a flashlight along can also be helpful (all the more so since street lights are not always present and/or functional). Cars can be known to make ninety-degree turns without looking first, so this is another potential hazard.

Westerners seem to feel a misplaced sense of safety when they find a painted crosswalk, but it is usually a false security as drivers rarely pay them any attention. Crossing larger intersections takes greater skill, courage, and Burmese intuition to know when to go. If you are unsure, shadow a local fellow who also seems to also be waiting to cross. At some busier streets, it may not be possible to cross all lanes at once, and you may have to go halfway and wait at the median to continue—where you can pause equanimously as cars rush past your back and by your front. Some major streets may have protected lights, but this is not as common as in other cities. Although it may instinctively feel safer, one of the worst things to do when crossing streets in Myanmar is to stop partway across the road if you see cars coming. If you walk at a steady pace, drivers will be able to anticipate where you are and where you will be; hesitations and stutter-steps will only make things more unpredictable and uncertain.

In *Land of a Thousand Eyes*, Peter Olszewski notes that it took him weeks of living in Yangon before “master[ing] the art of being a pedestrian [who] could successfully cross the street.” He came to enlist the help of a young postcard-seller every time he needed to cross, and eventually advocated a street-crossing technique he termed as “sparrow hopping.” He writes, “Watch a sparrow in a busy street and observe how it skillfully but nervously navigates toward a food source.” He goes on to say, “There is never really a full break in the traffic. What I do is stand on the edge of lane one and, if I spot a brief break, I hop across that lane and stand on the line separating lane one from lane two. There I stand until my instinct tells me the next car is moving a little slowly and I have just enough time to hop to the next line, separating lane two from lane three. Once I spot a break, I must move forward without hesitation because there’s no turning back. The Myanmar are experts at this, but it takes foreigners some time to build up the necessary nerve.”

Not in Kansas (or Colorado) Anymore

One American yogi shares her own experience of learning to navigate downtown Yangon: “Crossing on foot from one side of the street to the other was a massive challenge for me, so much so, that on days when I wasn’t up to par (feeling the tropical heat and tiredness of travel) I chose to stay on my side of the street and not partake in whatever I wanted on the other side. This would mean doing without something at a supermarket or shop and such. If a crosswalk was available, which was not often, or an overhead pedestrian bridge, the crossing was manageable. When I did opt or need to cross, I’d wait for some Burmese who would inch their way along lane by lane of traffic and I would scurry along with them, assuming that they knew how to dodge the cars and taxis as I certainly did not, especially having come from my home in rural Colorado where traffic is never ever an issue.”

Boat

Like trains, one may have a more romantic picture of boat travel along the Irrawaddy River than is the reality. However, unlike trains, there are more high-priced luxury possibilities with boats.

The British established the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company in the 1920s, and some of the original boats that survived World War II are still used today on the 5,000-plus miles of navigable waterways in the country. Most boats are run by what is now known as the **Inland Water Transport**. Some of these may take several days, while others (like the ferry across Yangon River to Dalla, the gateway to Saya



Thet Gyi's center) take only ten minutes. Spending some time on the Ayeyarwaddy (as it is now spelled)—known locally as “Our Mother River,”—can be a very pleasant experience.

When river crossings are necessary or possible to reach Buddhist sites of interest, they are listed in this guidebook. For those yogis and travelers who are interested in more options for boat travel, they can be found in a standard Myanmar guidebook.

Sayagyi U Goenka



Sayagyi U Goenka fondly recalled his own travel experiences when growing up in Burma as a boy. In one talk he said, “Once I took a train from Mandalay to [Monywa], then traveled by ship... to Kalewa on the Chindwin River, then partly by bullock-cart and partly on foot beside the bullock-cart, from Kalewa to Tamu. The long and difficult journey in this remote region... was very appealing to me. The impressions of this journey through the westernmost part of the country are indelibly etched on my mind.” In talking about boat travel, he noted, “It was a joy to take a dip in the swiftly flowing Irrawaddy, which grew vast and wide by the time it reached Mandalay. During the monsoons, the river widened, making its rapid currents dangerous, but I still enjoyed taking repeated dips in its waters. Occasionally, I sailed on riverboats on the picturesque Irrawaddy to the towns of Pagan (Bagan), Minbu, Magway, Thayet, and Prome (Pyay). The enchanting memories of those journeys are still fresh in my mind.”

Domestic Air Travel

“We flew over forested mountain ranges whose serrated higher peaks floated upon fleecy clouds. They were said to be infested by bandits, but they lay very peacefully in the pastel blue of early morning and only an occasional moth-eaten patch showed that human beings dwelt among them. On the flat lands of the west the Irrawady River meandered into view from time to time. And then the plane dropped down over white pagoda spires with houses on stilts looking like grey crabs crawling over mud flats. The air had the clean, cold tang of winter. I knew I was going to like Burma.”

—Marie Byles, *Journey Into Burmese Silence*

Many yogis choose to travel by domestic airlines. There is a domestic airport just next to the international airport in Yangon, serviced by several different carriers. Altogether, there are over 20 airports serving domestic commercial passengers in the country. If you want to make your reservations ahead of time, www.visitmm.com is a useful website. However, if internet connectivity issues arise, you might need to ask a friend or domestic travel agent to help you. **Muditā Works** (www.muditaworks.com) can also help. There are also regional offices of each airline, though they do not usually offer any particular discounts, with the exception of **Air Mandalay**, which at the time of this publication still has a tourist special that includes many of the major destinations. In the past, tickets could easily be acquired just a few days before departure, but given the recent travel boom, it's advisable to plan ahead.

Most airlines only accept cash for purchasing tickets. There is generally no incentive to buy return tickets, as one-way fares are exactly half (and sometimes less!). Most airlines allow free luggage, with standard weight limits. Airline reservation systems in Myanmar are not always the most modern, and some companies still rely on a standard Excel spreadsheet for their bookings. Errors are not uncommon, so it is strongly advised to collect one's tickets from the airline office in advance, and to confirm one's flight at least twenty-four hours prior to departure.

There are daily flights to most destinations, but they can sometimes be changed at a moment's notice, and delays have been frequent in the

past. In recent years, entire flight schedules were diverted due to a VIP's needs, although this is less likely these days. The most popular airline seems to be **Air Bagan**, followed by **Air Mandalay**; most travelers avoid **Myanma Air**. **Golden Myanmar Airlines** is a new company that offers domestic and international flights, and **Asian Wings Airways** is also new on the scene and known for its rock bottom fares. **MAI** (Myanmar Airways International) connects Yangon and Mandalay to various regional airports in neighboring countries. The domestic airline sector is now rapidly expanding, and so travelers are encouraged to check for up-to-date information at the time of travel.

A Smooth Landing in Rough Weather

Although Myanma Airways is not often the first choice for foreigners, UK meditator David Lambert relates one story he heard in the mid-1990s about a Harvard professor who flew this airline from Yangon to Mandalay. One may well wonder about the similarities between this story and one told about Taung Pu Lu Sayadaw on a San Francisco-bound plane. One story may have affected the other, or perhaps they were two separate incidents regarding the same monk. As Lambert describes in his short story "Chindwin,": "The plane entered a period of intense turbulence, it was being thrown around the sky like a plastic bag. The Harvard professor was sitting by the wing and was understandably nervous. Looking out he saw what seemed to be a monk, in full robes, take hold of the wing and settle the plane into a steady flight path. As the buffeting had settled down he called a flight attendant and asked her what she was seeing attached to the wing. She seemed embarrassed and proffered that it must be a trick of the light." After safely checking in at his hotel, Lambert then tells how the professor describes the monk's appearance to the manager, who enthusiastically responded that it sounded like a well-known monk residing in Amarapura. Lambert relates what happened next: "It took little time to reach the part of the monastery where this particular monk was residing. The professor was invited to wait and given green tea and *laphet* to quench his thirst and hunger. After a short while the monk appeared and introduced himself. The Harvard professor, though not a religious man, was educated and knew the custom of paying respect, which he started to do. After these rather clumsy fumbled introductions the Harvard professor started to recount the story, knowing full well that the monk is bound by his precepts to tell the truth. After he had told of the flight he... asked him, 'Sir, was it you?' The monk simply smiled and expressed thanks that the plane landed safely."

SHOPPING

- Overview
- Burmese arts and handicrafts

Overview

Myanmar is an exciting place to shop, especially at some of the more traditional marketplaces. Despite more frequent Western-style stores appearing on the scene, there are still many market districts that feature goods just as they have been made and sold for generations.

Many Burmese vendors seem to favor a “safety in numbers” approach, and so many of the same type of goods are sold on one single stretch of road. For example, one street might serve all one’s tool and hardware needs, while another offers every variety of DVD player or stereo speaker there is. One can find other areas specializing in Buddha statues, pillows, wood furniture, fish guts, dragon-fruit, and books. One street may have nothing but umbrella salesmen, another with nothing but umbrella repairmen, and still another with a random assortment of locks and keys spread out.



Therefore, if one is looking for a particular knick-knack, the first step is asking which street is known for selling it.

Most stalls seem to open around 9 am. It’s nice to walk through as they are going through their set-up routines, as many will play chanting or discourses from their favorite Sayadaw. Shop-owners consider their first sale of the day propitious, referring to it with the English term “Lucky Money,” and they’ll fan your recently delivered kyat over the rest of the products for good luck.

Don’t be surprised to spot dead batteries used as weights on the makeshift scales for fruit and vegetables. As a foreigner, they might try to charge a slightly higher price than for a local, but it typically

won't be as extreme as what you might find in India or other countries. If you are unsure, it's never a bad idea to ask a Burmese friend to come with you, or to compare prices with other shops. Haggling is accepted in markets, and shop dealers will give you a discount especially when you buy an item in bulk, but again, it is not as intrinsic to the culture as in other countries. Explaining that one is in Myanmar not as a tourist, but for practice, may help to inspire a more honest price—especially for Buddhist-themed purchases.

It is useful to know that supermarkets in Myanmar have ready-made wicker *dāna* baskets for formally offering to monks. The baskets contain various requisites such as robes and monk fans, along with other items. Yogis and lay people buy them on behalf of the monks, and present them as *dāna*.

Myanmar Marketplace Trivia

- In Myanmar, unlike many Western countries, broken or damaged items are not thrown out, but repaired and reused. There are stalls specializing in the repair of such items as umbrellas, shoes, sandals, watches, spectacles, and various kinds of electrical appliances. The fact that there is less emphasis on the continual production of new consumer goods in Myanmar was noted with great interest by the British economist Franz Schumacher many years ago in *Small is Beautiful*. Using the example of clothing, he notes that the goal in a “Buddhist economy” is to produce a garment “with the smallest possible effort, that is, with the smallest annual destruction of cloth and with the help of designs that involve the smallest possible input of toil.” According to Schumacher, this achieves the dual purpose of ensuring the dignity and health of the worker, while also not encouraging a consumption culture that will only serve to increase one's craving. In the same way, having the option to mend an old item rather than needing to immediately replace it also allows for less toil and use of local resources.
- At times you may wonder, “Why is that man walking the streets and calling out the same thing over and over again in that sing-song voice?” Meet the local repairman. Repairmen fix pots and pans, sharpen knives and scissors, and mend tires or sandals. Each repairman has his own signature chant, and after spending any time in the city or suburbs, it won't take long for you to recognize the different repairmen and the unique rhythms of their calls.

“But...but, Mr. Peter...”

“Borrowing and sharing resources is big in U Tun Htun’s circle and, while I am eating my meal of the traditional noodle and fish-paste dish, **mohinga**, I chat to Tun Htun and some of his male friends about this. I tell them how different life in my country is, where every man has his own house and around the house he has a fence. At the back of each house is a shed and in that shed is every tool that the man may need during his lifetime. I explain that the man who has to borrow tools is often portrayed as a person of low esteem—a loser—and how a television commercial for a chain of hardware stores in my country lectures men to be independent and buy all their tools from the store rather than borrowing them from friends. Tun Htun and his friends chatter amongst themselves in Myanmar. Tun Htun turns to me and says, ‘But Mr Peter, Mr Peter, but . . . but, but you must tell the men in your country that if they share their tools they will be able to spend more on their children’s education.’” Peter Olszewski, *Land of a Thousand Eyes*



Burmese Arts and Handicrafts

The following is a list of some of the more traditional Burmese arts and crafts that yogis frequently think about taking home. Many of these handicrafts come from artisans whose family livelihood has been the construction of that particular item for many generations.

Note: it is advisable to review the current sanctions, which may affect the legality of bringing certain items into another country. One should also check Burmese customs regulations, which may prohibit the taking of certain items outside the country.



Gongs: For yogis, this is perhaps one of the best items to take back to retain the literal vibrations of Burma. There are different sizes, from ones so small they will fit into your pocket, to one that may on its own require you to up the weight limits for your baggage on

your return flight home. The small ones may go for under 5000 kyat, while don't be surprised to pay upwards of 60,000 kyat for the larger ones that could wake an entire meditation center of sleeping yogis. Those that make a sound reminiscent of pagoda bells swaying in the breeze are also available. Generally, the gongs are sold according to weight, with prices being slightly higher if there is silver mixed in. Whichever size one buys, the wooden mallet should be included at no additional cost. It is also important to play them before buying, as each one has a different sonority. Sometimes very lightweight, thin brass gongs have a lovelier sound than heavier ones. Your Burmese friends may have a suggestion as to the best place to buy gongs. **Shwedagon**, particularly the eastern entrance of Yangon and **Maha Muni** at the steps leading up to the pagoda entrance in Mandalay are often the favorite choices. Most gongs are made within Mandalay itself.



Lacquerware: Another popular purchase in Myanmar is lacquerware, which is made into bowls, cups, vases, tables and other items. It is available almost anywhere. But beware of fraudulent lacquerware, which is poorly made, though looks authentic. As a general rule, the stiffer the lacquer, the poorer the quality; the more pliable it is, the greater the craftsmanship. **Bagan** is especially known for good lacquer. If you choose to purchase some while touring its famous temples, avoid the lacquer sold at temple entrances, which is often of a lower quality, and opt for a specialized and recommended shop instead.

Burmese Art: The contemporary art scene in Myanmar is lively and evocative. It is especially interesting these days as artists are able to more freely express their respective creative visions. One can find art that depicts Buddhist motifs, landscapes, rural life, and street scenes, as well as abstract paintings. For a smaller budget, the selection at **Bogyoke Market**, particularly the stalls situated on either side of the central entranceway (which are managed by the same owner, and include two additional galleries upstairs) is a good place to look. There are further galleries in the back, which tend to have a smaller selection



Min Way Aung. Even if one can't buy, it's still worth a look.

but lower prices. If one has more money to spend, or would just like to survey the art scene, Yangon has much to offer, in particular such galleries as **Pandsodan Gallery**, **Beikthano Gallery**, and **Lawkana Gallery** (which has rotating displays based upon a theme). **New Treasure** is particularly known for its Buddhist art, and features the work of highly respected Burmese painter U

Books: Readers and book-lovers of all backgrounds can come across interesting books in Myanmar that aren't easily obtainable in other countries. After all, where else could one find A. J. Ferrier's 1947 classic, *The Care and Management of Elephants in Burma*? One can similarly come across such finds as an 1890 survey of Upper Burma by the British government, an account of a fateful journey among the Wa by Italian missionaries, or an old biography of a famous Sayadaw.

While there are bookshops throughout the country, the greatest number are concentrated in Yangon. The area around **Kaba Aye Pagoda** has a wide selection of Dhamma books. **Parami Book Shop** is perhaps the most well-known, and the **Religious Affairs Department Book Counter** also has a nice selection. Not far away from these shops is the **International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University**, which has its own campus bookstore. This is also a great place to get translations of the Tipitaka, as well as the commentaries and additional works such as the Visuddhimagga and other English translations of the Pali scriptures. **Myanmar Book Shop** (www.myanmarbookshop.com) has an extraordinary inventory of nearly every Burma-related book that has come out in the last few centuries, although its titles are mostly new editions printed overseas, so the prices are higher. While they also ship abroad, you can visit their main location at Rm# 3004, 2nd Flr., Taw Win Centre, Pyay Rd (phone 0973105611); or a smaller shop at 561/567, Rm# 3, (G/F), MAC Tower (I), Merchant Rd. Finally, **Myanmar Book Centre** has the country's biggest inventory of books in English. It is located on the corner of Ahlone Road and Baho Road.

The downtown area of Yangon also has a wide array of booksellers. The streets around **Bogyoke Market** and **Sule Pagoda** contain dozens

of storefront book shops and stalls where one can find a wide selection of books about Buddhism, Burmese culture, Burmese language, and many dictionary options of various sizes. Some popular bookshops in this area include **Parami Books** (a branch off the main Kaba Aye location) on Upper 29th Street (01-253246) and **Inwa Books** on Upper Pansodan (01-389838, 243216). Just south of there is the famous **Pansodan Street**, also known as the “Sidewalk College.” Here, you’ll find books spread out upon tarps and stalls scattered on all sides of the street. The area is quite unique in that most books are photocopied reprints from the original version of titles published long ago. Also in this area is **Green Books Store** which shares the YMCA building on Thein Phyu Road at the corner of Maha Bandoola (01-296442, 706082). **Bagan Book Shop** on 37th Street (01-377227, 095117470) specializes in out-of-print books on Burma. For a Borders-like experience, you can try out the new **Monument Books**, a small walk away from the north entrance of Shwedagon pagoda and located at 150 Dhamma Zedi Road (01-536306, 705063). They sell new books at quite reasonable prices, have a pleasant upstairs café, and can also place orders for you if you don’t find what you are looking for. For those yogis that are in Yangon for longer periods, a resident Czech monk at **Shwe Oo Min Monastery** in Mingaladon has a very impressive personal collection, and he has invited yogis to visit and even check out books for up to one week. Finally, if one happens upon a particularly pleasing Burmese dhamma books, almost all have information of the publisher and bookseller, and by visiting or calling one can find many more treasures.

For those with **e-readers**, one can also get many free electronic versions of Burma-related books whose copyright has expired by sleuthing on the Internet. There are books by local authors about culture, reminiscences of British colonials, and introductions to Buddhism at the time when few foreigners had heard of the religion. For more on recommended titles, see Chapter 6.

Buddha Statues: Burmese-made Buddha **statues** are popular purchases among foreign yogis. One can find statues small enough to hold in one’s palm, and big enough that an entire football team would be required to move it. Statues can be fashioned from jade, ivory, metal, gold, silver, copper, brass, and all types of wood, such as sandalwood, teak, mahogany, ironwood, Eugenia, Padauk, and *yamanay* (the latter being a white color and light in weight, often called “white teak” and

used when gold leaf is intended to be applied). Some Burmese will purchase statues made from material that corresponds to a particular day of birth or astrological sign. The Buddha can be shown depicted in a variety of postures and resting on a variety of platforms, each having its own meaning, and for the donor to select according to their preference.

Purchasing a statue for the family altar is a highly important task for many Burmese. They will take great care to select just the right face and posture that resonates with them, and can inspire the family while paying respects or meditating before it (for more on home shrines, see upcoming Chapter 7.6). In older days, the molds for Buddha images were



bronze, and when finished, donors could engrave their names and aspirations on either the back or base of the terra-cotta tablets (one can still find these engravings when viewing older Buddha statues). *Note: be sure to avoid the scam of a statue covered with cheap gold leaf over plastic.* Suggested locations to buy them include the east and south entrances at **Shwedagon**

Pagoda and the east entrance at **Maha Myat Muni Pagoda** towards the **Ananda Pagoda**. Another possibility is **Shwe La Yaung** shop (5/6, Outer Row, 187/188, Shed A, Bahan Market, Oak Street. Their show room is located at Old Yae Tar Shae Street, Bahan Tsp (phone 01-380913, 0973241888, 095010199, 095004014). Although some street stalls may sell what looks to be real antique statues, these are not always authentic. Standard pricing is usually 1500-2500 kyat per inch, meaning a seven inch Buddha image will cost about 15,000 kyat. Keep in mind that in Myanmar Buddha statues cannot be taken abroad for commercial intent, but they can be for personal inspiration and use. Also, since Buddha statues are highly revered, one should be careful not to set them lower than one's feet, including when one is transporting them.

Handmade paper: Areas in upper Myanmar specialize in traditional, handmade paper products, particularly parasols that employ traditional Burmese designs. While these aren't very effective during rainy season and may be too cumbersome in hot season, they are colorful and exotic. It is also possible while in Shan state to attend workshops showing how the paper is made. For more information, see upcoming Chapter 14.

Traditional Paper Making

"There were... bales of strong, soft Shan paper made from the green weeds of mountain streams, or at least so I was told as a child. I understand that the paper is actually made from the bark of a small Asian mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). The mulberry leaves fed to silk worms are from another tree of the same family. The bark undergoes a laborious process to reduce it to a pulp. It is then thinly spread on to a tray with wood frames and left to dry in the sun to become a sheet of Shan paper. Nowadays Pindaya, which lies west of Inle, seems to be the main centre for its production. We found the same kind of paper being made by the Lanteng people in northern Laos, while a similar paper was widely used in Nepal." Sao Sanda, *The Moon Princess*

Puppets: Puppet shows are one of the great art forms in Burmese culture, and buying a traditional wooden puppet can be a nice memory of one's time in the country. The puppets start from the rather inexpensive cost of only a few thousand kyat, and go up in quality as the designs become more complex and a higher quality of materials are used. Monastic figures are generally not represented, but you can choose from among a selection of Burmese kings, princes, warriors, princesses, jesters, and laymen, all wearing very fine longyi and jackets.



Tapestries: In Burmese, tapestry is *ka~. la~. Kā* (ကန့်လန့်ကာ), while *you~: nai~ hma, chau~: cō* (ရွှေချည်ထိုး) is the Burmese word for the art form of gold embroidered tapestry, although nowadays all embroidered tapestries are called *shwe chi doe* regardless of whether they have gold thread. They are usually decorated with gold thread and sequins, and depict scenes from ancient Burmese history or the Jātaka Tales. This craft represents one of the country's great artistic traditions.

A Buddha Image

When looking to commission, purchase, or give the gift of a Buddha image, one may wish to recall the *Satthubimbapūjanīyāṇisaṃsa Sutta*. It should be stated, however, that many scholars do not regard this sutta as part of Buddha-Vacana, meaning the canon of verified words coming directly from the Buddha's teachings. Many also claim that no image of the Buddha's likeness appeared until at least five hundred years after his passing. In Myanmar, however, the *Satthubimbapūjanīyāṇisaṃsa Sutta*¹ is highly regarded, and also plays an important role in the origination story of Maha Myat Muni Pagoda in Mandalay. In Myanmar also, the acquisition, presentation, and instillation of a Buddha image are considered highly auspicious occasions, and for many these words would ring throughout the mind of the donor:

“Without delusion in the time of dying, go directly to the realms of good;

Wise generous giver, this is the fruit of making Buddha image. At the time of death, not bewildered, they go directly to happy states, wise and generous heroes, this is a fruit of (making) Buddha's image.”

Bargaining

Bargaining in Myanmar takes place outside of formal stores. While it does happen in Myanmar more frequently than in Western countries, the Burmese don't necessarily relish the art of haggling as much as in other parts of the world, such as India or the Middle East. If there is any jacking up the price at all for a foreigner, it's more likely to be at tourist venues. And when prices *are* hiked, the initial asking price may be only slightly higher than local prices, as opposed to more intense bargaining cultures where tourists can be charged over twenty times the actual price without blinking an eye. Be aware that some Burmese may find even the idea of a foreigner bargaining over a pittance quite distasteful! Remember that even foreigners who feel they are not wealthy are relatively well off compared to most Burmese, and a “wealthy” foreigner bargaining over half a dollar with someone who may make just \$10 for the entire day can be seen as unseemly. This is not to say that you should just be happy to be taken advantage of, either—especially when buying an expensive item. Also, some Burmese do enjoy the

1 Also called at times the *Satthubimba Sutta*; however, no less an august authority than Sitagu Sayadaw once confirmed that the longer name is proper name, and that its original in form was as a palm leaf manuscript.

social give and take of respectful bargaining when it is done with respect and humor.

If one does decide bargaining is appropriate in a particular situation, the key is not to show anger. Bargaining in Myanmar is a gentle, polite and friendly give-and-take, with both sides valuing the other person. It's a form of pleasant conversation. One should be persistent and engaging, without showing any signs of impatience, and smiling as one makes a counter offer. If the price is still too high, one can slowly begin to walk away. *Note also that starting to bargain signifies the intent to buy, so don't make an offer for something unless you are considering purchasing it.* If you really want a certain item that seems expensive, you can also ask a Burmese friend to come with you and negotiate on your behalf.



In sum, the best advice is to consider if a given situation warrants some degree of price negotiation. Certainly keep in mind the role of smiling in Burmese culture, which can impact the bargaining process in at least two key ways. First, you are more likely to be successful if you bargain with a genuine smile, reflecting consideration and value to the vendor. And second, remember that just because the Burmese seller is smiling doesn't mean they're enjoying the experience!

Tipping and "Tea Money"

Tipping is not expected in Myanmar, although as in all countries, it is much appreciated. It doesn't have to be much—at a restaurant never more than ten percent and for small acts like carrying baggage or holding an umbrella over you, 500 or 1000 kyat bills are fine.

Burmese also refer to any actions that grease the wheels or move things along as "tea money." This is sometimes collected on the side of the road from cars as they pass makeshift barricades, from parking attendants on city streets, and others who may help you with small services.

As Myanmar more than anything is a generous country, if you'd like to give to people (e.g. those that are not performing a service for you), it may be best to keep some candies, fruits, or other such items on hand for such occasions.

BURMESE CLOTHING

- Women's longyi
- Men's longyi
- Yogi considerations

“The Burmese must be the best-dressed people in the world.”

—Norman Lewis,
Golden Earth

There are some countries where locals frown on foreigners attempting to wear their traditional clothing. Myanmar is not one of them! Outside of learning the language or the taking of robes, there is little you can do that will endear you more than walking around in Burmese clothing. It will indicate that you are curious in learning more about Burmese people and culture, and that you are comfortable in their environment. For many Burmese, seeing you in their clothing will be enough to remove any lingering shyness and encourage many to strike up a conversation.

The traditional mode of dress in Burma has been some form or other of a sarong-like garment. In pre-colonial times, the male version was referred to as a *taungshay paso*. Somewhat different than the version worn in modern day Myanmar, it featured a long piece of cloth that opened in front to reveal the lower legs, with dark cotton or velvet added on the upper edge and a patterned cloth that trailed on the ground as one walked. However, owing to Indian and British influences in the nineteenth century, this tradition was lost, replaced by what is now known as the *longyi*, a word originally used to describe the sarong worn by Malay men. Today, *longyi* is used as unisex term describing the garment, while *pasoe* designates those worn by men and *htamein* are for females. As Ma Thanegi concisely puts it, “a longyi is cool, comfortable and when worn neatly, an expensive type of fabric or thicker weave turn it an elegant formal wear.... for both genders.”



The longyi of today is an extremely useful garment in Myanmar. For example, sometimes accommodations include an **outdoor bathing** area with no privacy—men will remove their shirts and bathe in their longyis, while women will hike up their tubular longyis below their armpits, having removed their blouses, and bathe with the garment secured below their neck. It also happens to be the perfect garment for Burma's tropical climate, as it allows for easy air circulation and yet can be adjusted to cover more of the body in cooler weather, as well as providing some protection from mosquitoes.

Historically, the Burmese were so accustomed to their longyis that when the British first arrived, they referred to them as “the trouser people” (they were also called “hat-wearing sort of people”, “white Indians,” and “white face sort of people”). Once was the day when every home had its own loom tended by the elder women of the family, so much so that there was an old expression that “men who cannot read are like the blind; women who cannot weave are like the cripple.”

Most ethnic groups in Myanmar have their own distinct fabric pattern. Wearing one of these longyis will be particularly appreciated if you happen to be spotted by someone of that ethnicity. The Chin especially are internationally renowned for their fabric, and in 2007, the Textile Museum in Washington DC had a full exhibit honoring

“How-To-Tie a Longyi/Paso”



their fabrics (Yoe Yar May is one of a few shops in Yangon's **Bogyoke Market** that is famous for its Chin fabrics, and Kachin fabrics can also be found here).

For male yogis who are planning to travel away from urban areas or visit pagodas and monasteries, it is advisable to have at minimum of two longyi. Women yogis may also want an additional one for outside bathing. If one plans to participate in any formal or semi-formal events during one's visit (such as an ordination, dāna offering, dhamma talk, or dinner with friends), one should have at least one outfit of a slightly higher quality on hand.

■ IMPORTANT WORDS ABOUT DRESS IN BURMESE SOCIETY

Local author Ma Thanegi has offered the following points concerning Burmese dress that foreign yogis should keep in mind:

- To be casual or in unclean clothes is insulting the host and those present; the more 'special' one dresses, the more it means one respects the occasion. To look respectable in public is of utmost importance, in clothing, behavior and speech.
- The waist garment '*longyi*' (unisex word), *paso* (male garment), or *hta-mein* (female garment) is somewhat unwieldy, but it should be wrapped neatly. For men, the front knot is not really a tied knot but is a 'turn and tuck' that should be small and neat without a corner flopping out.
- Wearing a t-shirt with a *paso* does not look respectable. The short-collared Burmese shirt that comes with long or short sleeves, and never in loud patterns, matches very well with a *paso*.
- Younger girls might go around in short skirts or low slung jeans and wear skimpy tops, but most older folks are extremely disturbed about this; it is not acceptable behavior.

Prohibited Fashions

Keep in mind that sporting Buddha images is deemed inappropriate in Buddhist countries. This includes the Buddha likeness, quotations, or monk representations on any clothing that one would wear, as well as bodily tattoos. The same is true of cloths, images, or art that one may keep in one's home for decorations. Displaying these in one's shrine room or in the place where one practices meditation and pays respects is fine.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin in England

When Sayagyi U Ba Khin traveled to the UK, Germany, and France in 1963, he was warned that autumn can get quite cold in Europe and that warmer clothing may be required.¹ However, having never in his life worn anything other than traditional longyis, he packed only these. Much to his delight, an unusual heat wave hit just as he landed. The great meditation teacher even cut out and later shared the newspaper clippings describing the strange weather phenomenon that had allowed him to comfortably wear his traditional clothing throughout the trip. As for his first and only travel abroad experience, U Ba Khin is reported to have asked, “What is there in England more wonderful than the thirty-one planes of existence that we here in Burma know about?”²



Women’s Longyis



Fabrics for women’s longyis can be woven, printed, or embroidered, made of *batik* fashion, include metallic threads and beads of a luminous hue, or exhibit traditional weavings that designate specific ethnic groups.

They can come in cotton, silk, polyester, satin, crepe, as well as other fabrics. For certain events such as holidays or paying respect at a pagoda or monastery, more elaborate, higher quality longyis will be worn.

Fabric varies in price, silk being more expensive, batik patterns less, and cotton or polyester probably the least costly. Sufficient fabric for a longyi can start as low as 4000 kyat, and it is possible to negotiate the price if buying more than one. To have the fabric sewn in a tube with the addition of the black band for women takes about five minutes and costs perhaps 1000 kyat.

Women’s longyis consist of the typical tube of fabric, and also include a black, plain cotton band sewn to the top. It is worn by

1 See ‘The Anecdotes of Sayagyi U Ba Khin’, compiled by Sayagyi U Chit Tin (1999 edition, pages 50, 124 and 125)

2 Quoted by Dr. Winston King in his article about Sayagyi U Ba Khin in the ‘Maha Bodhi’ Vol. 80 No.4 p.105 and included by Sayagyi U Chit Tin in a footnote at page 124 of ‘The Anecdotes of Sayagyi U Ba Khin’ (1999 edition)

pulling the tube to one side against one's midsection, holding tight the extended fabric, crossing it back over and tucking it into the black band at the opposite side of the body. Most convenient may be the same type of longyi that has strings at the waist where they can be tied at the back, or a hook on the side. Not recommended for reasons of modesty are the ready-made, Western-style wrap-around that are *not* sewn in a tube, for they can fly open in the breeze and reveal the legs.

With the longyi, women usually wear a fitted blouse, tucked in or not, and worn waist-length or slightly below the waistline. A traditional style is a blouse with fabric-covered buttons closed with fabric loops, set off to the side (rather than the middle of the blouse) and no button holes. Blouses can include a high neckline and either cap sleeves or long sleeves. Women will also frequently wear a blouse sewn from the same material as the longyi and thus making a complete outfit.

One may want to buy one's own fabric and find a local tailor to custom make a longyi. This can take a few days. Tailors are set up with sewing machines in downtown Yangon at **Bogyoke Aung San Market** and may be the most reasonable. In addition to Yangon, Mandalay and Taunggyi also have large selections, and shops along the roadsides carry longyi fabric for sale.

Longyi Memories

Inle Lake is known for producing some of the finest women's patterns in the country, and for many years the weavers produced fabrics in the *zimme* and *bankok* styles (inspired respectively by weavers in Chiang Mai and Bangkok). Sao Sanda describes these in further detail in her book *The Moon Princess*:

"The *zimme* patterns were brightly coloured in various designs such as flowers and geometric shapes. The soft silk was not printed but tie-dyed to make up the patterns. Since only three or four lengths of the *sin* were woven at one time, the patterns were unique for each length, which was about six or eight yards. As these weaving houses were not factories in the strict sense, there was no uniform method of using the different dyes and designs woven. Although they made beautiful *sins*, there was not a wide market for the silks.

"It was slightly different with the *bankok* silk which was in two colours – white with green, blue or black. The pattern was of wriggling lines, and the combination of the two colours produced a softer shade of the green or blue, while the black and white produced a smart grey. These fabrics were usually exported to Mandalay for Burman men to wear on festive occasions. Women wore the *bankok* too, though they were somewhat stiff, making a swishing sound when one walked."

Integrating into the Culture

"Before my first trip to Burma in 2008 it was suggested that I bring few clothes and plan on buying and wearing longyis for my 28-day tourist stay. I was told that the locals will thoroughly enjoy that I wear the clothing of the country. And that was definitely true.

"As a woman who sews and loves fabric stores, I was joyfully overwhelmed with the extensive and colorful selection of fabric at Bogyoke Market. I was like a kid in a candy store! And once local acquaintances saw me wearing longyis, I was given more as presents. In each subsequent visit I made to Burma I seemed to acquire more longyis, most as gifts. Then, after five trips to Burma I found myself with so many longyis, more than I would ever take overseas at one time, I created a 'longyi quilt' for use at home, a lap quilt of squares cut from a few of my older longyis and backed in batik.

"I first began wearing longyis in the traditional tube shape and the ready-made with ties. I was constantly tucking and re-tucking the tube to keep the longyi fitted nicely and looking as if I knew what I was doing. At an outdoor tailoring shop... the women

created longyis with closures of fabric covered buttons and fabric loops and a zipper closure for the longyi with the matching blouse.

That was how I became aware that as a Western woman I could wear a longyi that always stayed neat on my body. Still, I never travel to Burma without a tube longyi as I have needed it for bathing at monasteries in Sagaing, Ingyinbin, and other sites.

"And, while dressed in a longyi, women pass me by with huge smiles, chuckles, and sweet compliments of how lovely is the longyi. I am treated with greater friendliness than the few times I chose to don Western wear in Yangon." Miriam, Colorado



Getting That Longyi to Stay Up!

Meditator Samantha Wechsler of Boston shares her experiences of learning how to properly wear a Burmese longyi:

“By then, my longyi had started to come loose, and what I didn’t yet know was that you could casually re-tie it in public. I started to panic (I’ll admit that I think I forgot to focus on sensation or come back to *ānāpāna!*), and with a shy smile I clutched my umbrella and bag in one hand, and the waistline of my longyi in the other.

“When I turned the corner, I felt a wave of relief come over me. There was just one more stall, on the right side of the road, where two older Burmese ladies with beaming, toothless smiles were cooking. I made a beeline for them, laughing and pointing to my now completely untied longyi.

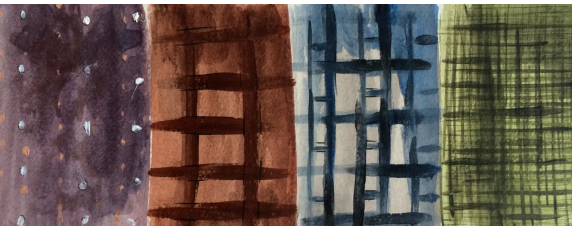


They yanked me aside, grabbing my longyi and my waist—laughing uproariously—and secured my clothes with such force I could barely breathe. They figured out that I needed more of a lesson, so we untied and retied until they were reasonably confident that I’d gotten the hang of it. And of course, I was just happy that my longyi was no longer hanging off of me!

“I made it to Dhamma Joti and all the way back to Beautyland before my longyi starting falling off again, realizing now that not knowing how to dress myself was a great way to break the ice with strangers on the street. As I would soon discover, though, most Burmese will look for any excuse, just like me, to make a cross-cultural connection.”



Men’s Longyis



The culture of purchasing and wearing longyis tends to be more straight-forward and simple for men. Men’s longyis are usually made of cotton, silk, or a combination of the two. While *paso* was also the

name of the somewhat different garment that preceded the longyi (see above), today longyi and *paso* are more or less used interchangeably to refer to the male’s garment. There are many different patterns to

choose, from typical Burmese striped or checkered styles to red Mon designs, and from blue Karen fabrics to the more green Kachin longyis. There are also more colorful longyis from Bangladesh and Bengal, as well as other parts of India.¹ There are many other ethnic patterns available that a Burmese friend or local shop owner can explain as needed. There is no “correct” side that must be worn up or down on the men’s longyi, and cheaper longyis can be worn inside out, unlike the more expensive longyis that are more thickly woven. The important thing is to make sure to tie your final knot neatly: that is, that the folds on either side are parallel, as with the front and back, and that the knot looks neat and centered. Hastily and/or sloppily tied knots (used by most manual laborers, who are dressing for very utilitarian reasons and not to look “proper”) will be noticed by your Burmese friends, and are a sign of carelessness about one’s appearance.

The cheapest longyi for men costs just around 2,000 kyat, while better quality ones can go for much higher. The higher quality longyis use heavier fabric, so some are not as cool in hot weather. For Burmese who can afford more expensive longyis, however, their personal comfort is less important than looking elegant. If one is invited to or attends a formal occasion, cheaper quality longyis should never be worn. More appropriate are the thicker weave cotton longyis, or silk, accompanied by a long sleeved white shirt. Ma Thanegi advises to “never wear cheap-looking cotton to formal affairs. If one does not have an appropriate high quality longyi, better to wear long pants and a long sleeved shirt, though never jeans or shorts.” The top quality brand is known as *ū*: *ja-*: ((ဦးဂုဏ်း)), followed by *ṣwe ywě*. *wā* (ရွှေတိဂုံ) and *myā< cā pṣū/byū* (ကြာဖြူ). There’s no need to have anything tailored, as the longyi is already a one-size-fits-all garment. It’s usually fine to wear any t-shirt with it, except in formal situations. Locally-made collared shirts are made with short sleeves and thin fabric so you stay cool and can be found in most markets, particularly **Bogyoke Market** in



1 This is what the Burmese-born Indian Sayagyi U Goenka wore, more specifically a *pa lay kut*, which is made in India and features a pattern of large checks. Made of fine thin cotton, it is very cool and usually in blue and white colors.

Yangon, as well as at various shops along Inle Lake. Male yogis may also choose to wear Shan pants, which are very baggy, fisherman-style pants with a string that ties around in front.

Shan Fashion

The Shan people do not wear the longyi, as some see it as a more effeminate garment. Rather they commonly wear Shan pants, giving rise to the somewhat archaic Burmese proverb, *Shan hnin sin, leh pyin gya hma thi*. This can be translated as “only in an open field can one distinguish a Shan from an elephant,” for the Shan pants are seen as wide as the legs of an elephant. It was only after World War II, when more and more Bamars came to Shan state, that residents became accustomed to the clothing style. The Kayah, Kachin, Pa-O, Palaung, and Rawang are other ethnic groups who consider trousers a traditional garment.

It can take some men a little while to get comfortable tying a longyi, and overcoming their fear that it could come off in a public place. To learn how to tie it properly, one is best served by asking a Burmese friend for assistance—some foreign yogis have stories of spending entire mornings with their hotel staff for longyi-tying lessons. If one is particularly nervous about it coming undone, make the upper knot tighter and do a second loop to keep it more secure.

There are close to a dozen different ways that the men’s longyi can be tied, each carrying its own meaning (see **here** for a partial list). One local shop-owner noted the style preferred by many foreigners: “They wear their longyi villager-style, up around the knee—most people in the city wear it long.” Needless to say, your longyi-tying and wearing skill will be apparent to any locals you meet within seconds. As the style of wear can indicate whether you are “fresh off the boat” or an old Burma-hand, a great way to make a good impression is to *leave your hotel with your longyi tied right*. Because of *anar* (see Chapter 6) friends may insist that you are wearing it just fine (even when you are most certainly *not*), so if you really want to be sure, ask a second (or third) opinion. A couple of simple longyi-tying tips until one gets more proficient:

- Keep the longyi equidistant across the waist.
- Keep the knot straight and just under the belly button.
- Tie it so that the two folds guide and anticipate the legs and gait.
- It should end just above the ankles so as to accentuate and guide one’s movement, making a more graceful walk.

The appropriate longyi outfit should always end with a pair of sandals. Big bulky footwear like Tevas will do, but one will get even happier looks by wearing normal, thin flip-flops. Whatever you do, don't don a pair of shoes with your longyi, a fashion faux-pas of huge proportions! Money, keys, wallets and other items are usually tucked in the side of the longyi, and loose change or other valuables can be tied and secured inside the topknot.

The Ubiquitous Longyi

While female longyis are never used for anything except their intended purpose, the male longyis are some of the most versatile products one can find. Following are just some of the ways old male longyis are put to use in Myanmar:

- Curtains
- Rags
- Cut in strips to make mops
- Stuffed into car seat as added upholstery, or into car tires when the inner tubes wore down.
- Blankets
- Sling for bone strain
- Baby hammock
- Baby harness (e.g. to carry while walking)
- Bathing cloth
- Doormat
- Stretching device
- Towel
- An aid to haul firewood
- Slung to carry items as a makeshift rucksack
- Wrapped in a coil on the head to balance while carrying large baskets and other things
- Folded and used as a shoulder pad when carrying a large load (often when balancing water buckets, as this technique is known as *yei leh*, or “water change”)
- As a buoy to stay afloat by trapping air within its fabric (needs to be seen to be believed)
- As a lasso (as featured in the terrible Burmese comedy movies shown on overnight bus trips)



Longyi Styling

Longyis in Myanmar are worn in a variety of ways depending on the situation and formality.¹ Here are some examples:

- **Putso:** This longyi style is worn short on the legs with the fabric rolled on the waist.
- **Kha daung kyaik:** One tucks the longyi up around the thighs so that the legs are free (some have said that it resembles a giant diaper), allowing one to participate in sports or other rigorous activities. This is also called *kha daung myaung aung kyait*. There are even a couple proverbs associated with this style: *kha daung kyait ma phyote ne oo* means that one should not let one's longyi down, as there is still work to be done. And *kha daung kyait tachar, phin ta char* means that one is wearing a longyi in a particular style at an inappropriate time, and so out of sync with the occasion.
- In rainy weather, one bunches up the fabric and ties it higher on the abdomen, so that one's movement is not hindered by wet fabric at the ankles.
- **Taung Shay Pa Soe:** For formal activities such as weddings, theatrical dances, *nat* ceremonies and other *pwe*, very long and straight longyi are worn made of stiffer fabric and tied with very neat and perfect folds. They are fastened in a different style so additional fabric shows in front, or at times carried in the hand; some dancers may even drape it around their neck. The name of this longyi translates as a "long *taung* longyi," *taung* being a Burmese measurement that goes from the elbow to the finger tip of an adult (usually considered about 18 inches), and refers to garments worn in the pre-British days.
- **Kwin Thaing:** In this style of wearing a longyi, it is slung across the shoulders crosswise (by children, comedians, and drunkards).

Advantages of the Longyi

"The sarong is a practical garment that serves many purposes. When bathing at the public well, women can pull it over their breasts and bathe; it can be turned around if dirtied or stained; it can be used to wipe a sweaty face; it makes sitting down on the floor very easy when paying respects to monks and elders; and it can be loosened after a big meal or to cool one's legs on a hot day. Perhaps best of all, the sarong allows one to get slim or grow stout without the need for alteration." Daniel Isaac Combs, *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*



¹ It should also be noted that different ethnic groups will also wear and tie the longyi according to their own traditions.

တစ်ခါလာ မဲပြာပုဆိုး (*tə khā lā, mē pyā pashō:*): a Burmese proverb which translates to, “Every time one came, he wore a blue longyi,” and is similar to the English expression, “Every time, the same old tune.”



Yogi Considerations

So, in the end, how do clothing choices affect the foreign yogi—that is, those who are not already planning to wear the saffron? There can be a learning curve in cultivating what is, for most, an unaccustomed sensibility. In particular, one must learn how to move so “socially inappropriate” parts of the body remain covered at all times, something many foreign yogis are unaware of as this is not a concern when wearing pants or even shorts. It’s not uncommon for foreign yogis to unknowingly walk and sit in ways that either open up their longyi in obvious ways for an “uh-oh” kind of exposure, or cause it to more subtly shift position, exposing themselves in less apparent ways, such as letting a knee peek out at a socially inappropriate time. It’s important for foreign yogis to develop this sensibility and awareness: *the longyi fabric should cover the leg from the calf up.*

Women meditators should be aware that their Burmese counterparts dress the part when going on pilgrimage or retreat. Along with the specific longyi-shirt combination mentioned earlier, they also wear a shoulder scarf, called a *yaw but* (or alternative a *yaw tabet*, with the latter word meaning “towel”).¹ When it is placed on one’s shoulder, it is known as *yaw but tin thi*, which some have translated as meaning “to wrap one’s shoulder in peace.”² The *yaw but* may be plain brown, and can also feature words from the Buddha or the name and image of a particular monastery or pagoda. It is always worn over the left shoulder, and should be arranged so that any writing is draped across the chest and visible. Some yogis regard this with as much reverence as a monk might his robes. While not required, it is a nice way to alert the people around as to one’s spiritual aspirations and intentions. If one does not want to wear (or does not have) a brown and white dress, it is also acceptable to just wear the brown sash over other clothes. One

1 These can also be worn by men, although they seem to be more *de rigueur* among women.

2 More literally, *yaw* can be translated as “peaceful,” “graceful,” or “knowing the way to nibbana.” *Tin thi* refers to the act of putting something on. So it is not a literal translation. *Yaw but tin thi* can also be rendered as “peace to wrap [oneself] in.”

American yogi commented while at a monastery: “As I was unaware of this [typical female yogi dress] I arrived with multi-colored longyi, the gifts I’d received from previous visits to Myanmar. [At the monastery] I wore lavender and sage and dressed in cotton and silk and at times Thai batik. I did tend to stand out a bit, which was not my intention.”

This brown-and-white female dress code takes on a greater significance in a meditation setting, as Kay Thi Hlaing explains. She notes that the dark brown is called “yogi color,” and during a Mahasi course was told of its significance. The teacher told her “when we are wearing the white colored blouse, we could see we are very clear and escape from the dirty [sic]. The dark brown longyi [helps] us escape from the infatuation of a beautifully colored garment. By all of us wearing the same dress, it helps our mind to be free from greed.”

Dirt on the Clean

There is a story in the Dhammapada that relates to the cleaning of the mind, being symbolized by dirty cloth. The Buddha gives a novice named Cuula Panthaka a white cloth that the Buddha’s mental powers have cleaned completely. While they are in the Perfumed Chamber of a monastery, the Buddha advises the novice to face towards the East while rubbing the cloth, and repeating the words “removal of impurity!” The Buddha then went off towards the home of Jivaka with his disciples to eat lunch, and the novice continued as instructed. But he found that the more he rubbed the cloth, the more soiled it became. With this came the thought, “This piece of cloth was perfectly clean before. But through this body of mine it has lost its original character and has become soiled. ‘Impermanent, indeed, are all existing things!’” U Sarana explains the morale: “And grasping the thought of decay and death, he developed Insight. The Teacher, knowing that the novice’s mind had attained Insight, said, ‘Little Wayman, think not that only a piece of cloth has become soiled and dyed with impurity. Indeed within you are lust, impurity, and other defilements; remove them.’”

There are no traditional requirements for male yogis. Some do wear the brown scarf, but it is less common than for women. These scarves can be bought at most markets, and are also usually sold outside pagodas and at some monasteries and meditation centers.

Note that some meditation-oriented monasteries make this decision about appropriate clothing for yogis. They require all male yogis to wear longyis and female yogis to wear brown skirts with a white blouse; at such sites pants may be completely prohibited.

Longyi Colors

White blouses or shirts worn with emerald green longyis indicate that one is either a teacher or student at a public school. Burmese women will often wear dark brown colored longyis and white blouses called *yaw but tin thi* when they go on pilgrimage or undertake other spiritual endeavors.

Kory Goldberg went on a Pariyatti pilgrimage in 2014 and remarks on his experience in wearing this clothing: “Although I understood intellectually the value of everyone in the group wearing the same thing as a marker of breaking down distinction and creating a group bond, for some reason I didn’t really feel comfortable with the standardized attire... nevertheless, I wore [it]... and thought to myself this is a great ego destroying practice. As soon as we got off the bus I noticed how everyone’s eyes turned on us. While the handful of foreign tourists at the site looked at us as if we were more alien than the culture that they were visiting, the Burmese were all smiles, feeling proud that a group of foreign yogis came to their country to practice the Dhamma and wear specialized local attire to boot.”





PHOTOGRAPHY

“Myanmar is possibly the most photogenic place we have ever travelled to... [It] is a remarkable place where your camera will be as pleased as you at the end of every day.... The locals are always happy to share their moments with the lens and the landscapes seem to pose in perfect lighting for every quick snap of the shutter. Everywhere you look in Myanmar there is a photo waiting to be taken, you just have to be lucky enough to capture it before it’s taken over by yet another great photo opportunity.”

—Foreign traveler to Myanmar

Many Burmese seem to be avid picture-takers, and those without a camera will enjoy noting what you found worthy enough to record on film. Additionally, it is not unheard of for a Burmese to take a picture of you without asking, or to pose next to you as his friend takes it. That being said, it’s still best to ask for permission prior to snapping away.

It’s also appreciated if one shows the digital version of the picture after taking it. If possible, giving them a physical copy (made at any nearby photo shop for only a few kyats) will be very much appreciated. This will be appreciated especially, if one finds a way to print and deliver those photos to them. This can often be quite easy to do, as most buses will deliver items, and if you record their name and village, it

will reach them eventually. Alternatively, you can ask another yogi to take it on a future trip. One American meditator who visited Myanmar in successive years printed a number of photos between his trips and took them back with him, an experience he describes [here](#).

How does picture-taking relate to the life of a yogi in Myanmar?

- First of all, find out the discipline at the monastery or meditation center where one is staying. If one is enrolling in a specific course, photography may not be allowed during that time.
- Always be very respectful when taking photographs of monks. For some monks, how they are posed, what is around them, and how their robe is folded, is of critical importance. Picture-taking still has a solemn meaning for many, and many wish to formally prepare for even casual photos. Also be attentive to how the people are arranged in such cases (e.g. if there are females too close to the monk, what any females in the photo are wearing, who is standing and sitting, etc.) Not all monks feel this way, and some will grin wildly and even request a photo, of him alone or maybe together with you. Don't be shy to ask, as they'll be free to let you know what their preference is. For example, novices are usually happy to pose for pictures (or videos) all day for you. On the other hand, expect Sayadaws and other distinguished monks to be on the more conservative side, and be sure to inform them beforehand of one's intent to take a photo.
- There are some activities where a camera should be avoided. This includes when the monks are in the process of eating, which for them is a part of their mindfulness practice. It is unfortunate that many standard guides and tourist agencies have actually encouraged tourists to come to certain monasteries for the sole purpose of seeing and photographing monks eat their lunch.
- Make sure not to take photos in which you are standing in the front of a Buddha statue. While this custom may be permitted in other neighboring Buddhist countries, it is not common to do so in Myanmar.
- Even with the above caveat, most monastic activities are perfectly acceptable to photograph, such as giving *dāna*, alms rounds, paying respects, listening to Dhamma talks, or being ordained. What is more, many Burmese do not just take such photos, but go out of their way to pose so they get the shot just right! That said, it is still a good idea to ask beforehand, just to be sure.

TOILETS

ချေးယိုခါနီးမှ၊ ချေးတွင်းရှာ
chē: yō khā nī: hma, chē: t̥we~ šā

“Only when one has urgent need does one begin the search for a toilet.” Burmese proverb meaning to begin a task at the eleventh hour.

“The toilet had not been disturbed for months, and made angry, roaring noises when it flushed. I quickly learned to depress the handle at arm’s length and make a sprint for the wide open plains of the bedroom.”

—Andrew Marshall, *The Trouser People*



Toilet hygiene is an important issue in the Burmese countryside, as it is in much of the developing world. To reinforce the importance of toilet safety—especially to young children—before many Burmese movies, viewers are treated to a two-minute cartoon that shows the basic hygiene that should be followed when using a toilet. And as one American monk noted in his guide to non-Burmese monks and nuns at Pa Auk Monastery, “the toilets can be very *foreign* to foreigners.” He references one meditator who was at the monastery for four months before finally approaching the monk and asking him “how a yogi cleans himself.”

Ground-style toilets where people squat on their feet are common throughout local establishments and rural contexts, while Western-style can be found where tourists are expected. If you are somewhere with a choice of toilet types, be aware that ground-style toilets are generally better maintained than Western ones. Many locals generally do not use toilet paper, as the sewage system is quite narrow and can get easily clogged. For this reason, it is better to either use just a few squares of toilet paper for each restroom visit (that is, if you haven't already switched over to the water method), or to throw the paper away in a trash pile or dustbin.

One of the first questions many Westerners ask when seeing ground toilets for the first time is which way to face when cleaning oneself. The first thing to know is that footwear is not worn inside the toilet room, unless special slippers are provided. Then one should stand so that the buttocks are facing the small pool of water and the spray or tap is to your right side. As for toilet etiquette, even though there is not always a flush handle with ground-level toilets, they do need to be washed with water. There is usually a water bin in each toilet, and one uses the smaller bucket to send several generous scoops of water down the hole (making sure the toilet is fully flushed), and then refills the large water bin before leaving.



Another common question from Western yogis is how one is to clean oneself without the use of toilet paper. The easiest method is to use the spray gun if there is one handy, although these are not available in more rural areas. Otherwise, the standard method is to fill the cup from the basin, gently tilt it with the right hand, and use the left to scoop water onto those body parts that need it. As one gets more accustomed to this, the self-consciousness and even possible revulsion that can accompany the task initially, disappears, and one realizes that the process actually gets one cleaner than toilet paper. One can certainly imagine how important it is to immediately wash one's hands thoroughly with soap and water afterwards, especially the left hand. However, note that in Burmese toilet etiquette, one should *thoroughly* rinse one's left hand *before* touching the soap. Then one can wash both hands very well with soap and water. Finally, courtesy

demands that the water bucket be refilled to the top regardless of how one found it—monks will incur a minor offense for failing to do so, and they are also expected to wash their hands following use of the toilet. It is considered also good etiquette to wash away any visible footprints, and some outdoor toilets keep the door fastened shut at all times so as to prevent various creatures from entering.

Flushing the toilet well shows courtesy to the next person and also keeps the bathroom clean. Anywhere from two water bowls to half a bucket may be needed to adequately flush the toilet. The trick is to get the maximum suction and movement of the water, and with experience, one figures out how and where to pour the water to make that happen. Sometimes with large squatting toilets, it can be hard to tell, so sending an extra shot of water down after one thinks it's flushed doesn't hurt.

Some prefer the longyi to pants or shorts partly because it makes going to the toilet in Myanmar much simpler. If one does wear pants, it's a good idea to check to see that there's nothing that can spill out of any pockets, as whatever does will get pretty dirty. Some yogis carry a small hand towel to dry off with. Some Westerners also get in the habit of going paper-less and after some time, it becomes quite natural. For many, after some time they begin to see it as even more healthy and hygienic than using paper.

There are also public toilets, which typically charge a nominal fee. One may wonder where this money goes, since a quick look inside will suggest it's certainly not for upkeep. Public toilets can often be slippery and wet, so step carefully. Mops are generally not used in any toilets, but rather coconut frond stems that are fashioned as brooms and move water around the floor.

As far as monasteries and meditation centers go, the conditions will vary. Those that are more well-known receive greater amounts of dāna and regularly welcome foreign meditators will generally have nicer facilities, while remote monasteries will have more basic conditions. If you spend time in rural areas, you'll encounter small toilet huts built away from the residences, often made of thatch and in various states of disrepair.



Sometimes these can be a bit far from one's sleeping quarters, so it is recommended to bring a torch (flashlight) to avoid snakes and other such creatures. For those more remote villages that have no outside toilets of any kind, local residents merely use a pit, which periodically gets filled with dirt.

A Nat Geo Special

For meditators coming directly from Western countries to more remote sites, there can be some toilet-related culture shock. Mako Voelkel, an American meditator, commented, "The bathroom was also the site of much local wildlife, and I thought of a National Geographic special on 'Creatures of the Monastery Restroom.' Over the course of the week I had countless translucent geckos, spiders, ants and even a frog who somehow made it up to the second floor to hang out and meditate with me for a few days. At one point one of the geckos perished and the ants went into a frenzy that lasted the whole week, providing much to reflect on with regard to impermanence of the body! They were very efficient in my room as well, carefully clearing the top of my mosquito net of any stray dead insects."

New Public Toilets

Some downtown Yangon streets have seen the introduction of modern-style, portable toilets. Called "Public Mobile Urination Rooms" (or PMUR, pronounced non-ironically as "Peemur"), these cost 100 kyat and have signs warning users against making bowel movements in them. In a country where it's not rude for a man to urinate on the side of a road, the implementation of these portables have confused some long-time expats, who wonder if they are meant as an attempt to change bathroom behavior, serve as a "modernity prop," or was merely put in place by a good Samaritan hoping to provide relief to those who need it.

Another Kind of Refuse

As many foreign yogis connect their greater meditative practice with overall ecological concerns, a common question concerns the disposal of trash and garbage in Myanmar. Public littering is quite common, even at pagodas and monasteries. Dutifully throwing away garbage into bins is no guarantee that these will not, in turn, just be tossed out into the street or dumped somewhere else later. A common site seen throughout the country is the daily burning

of trash. Most monasteries have one or several burn piles where this happens throughout the day. (The issue of cleanliness at monasteries is taken up in more detail in Chapter 7.4)

Some Burmese youth have recently pushed for greater environmental awareness. Parts of Yangon have even begun a color-coded waste disposal service that requires its users to separate “dry waste” from “wet waste” and “cast-off shrine flowers.” However, some have felt that the practice of public littering is already so entrenched that this is simply too great a leap to make at this stage, and that an orderly collection of refuse should be the first priority. There have been some cases of community cleanups along city streets and in villages. Yogis concerned about this issue may wish to lead such a clean-up at a monastery or pagoda, where there will be an added merit for the good deed.

BATHING

As noted above, many Burmese, men as well as women, bathe outside. This is done in communal concrete tanks filled with cold water, shared by either their home or local community. As Myanmar is a modest society, public nudity is never appropriate in any context. Men will bathe by wearing just a longyi at the waist (often tying up the lower ends or bunching up the extra fabric to allow for more easy movement), while women will put a wrap that stretches from their chest to their knees. Lay people and monks bathe separately, but it's not uncommon to see either showering in public at village tubs or within monastery compounds respectively, although older monks and Sayadaws generally prefer to do so indoors. After finishing, one will hang the now-wet shower garments to dry in the hot sun and change into dry clothes.

If one is feeling adventurous, try an outdoor shower. These come in one of two forms: either a large bowl of water whereby one person sits (or squats) while dousing oneself from a small ladle; or, a large concrete tub that many people can use simultaneously, each with their own plastic scoop. If one still prefers to bathe more privately, most (but not all) monasteries will also have an enclosed room where one can shower in private. Sometimes one is lucky enough to find a bath

with a shower head. Of course, accepting whatever bathing situation is present is part of the renunciation *pāramī*, or *nekkhama*.

In most homes, meditation centers, and monasteries, hot water for bathing is rare. This is true regardless of the climate or season. Hot water showers are usually limited to hotels and nicer homes, as well as a limited number of more developed monasteries and meditation centers. There are a small number of hot springs in Myanmar, such as at Lashio, Inle Lake, in Karen state and a few other places.

For hints on surviving cold bucket showers, and other simplicities of monastery life, see Chapter 7.4.

Daily Water Needs

In many communities, the act of getting a household's water is one of the major responsibilities of the day. When visiting local villages, one of the more common sights found is of locals balancing a bamboo pole on their shoulders while carrying two buckets of water on either side. One will see old men and young girls struggling under the weight of the precious supply of water, walking in staggered steps so as not to spill any. This water is usually transferred to a large clay pot that sits outside the home, and is used throughout the day for washing and cooking (with drinking water often kept separately). Depending on the type of water supply, locals may have to walk quite far with the buckets each day as they fill up.





GEOGRAPHY

Area-wise, Myanmar is slightly smaller than the state of Texas. It occupies part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula that divides the Pacific from the Indian Ocean. It is bordered by Bangladesh and India to the west, China in the north, Laos and Thailand to the east, and the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal to the south. Along the border with China the terrain is quite mountainous, with the highest point in the country at 19,925 feet. Several mountain chains run north to south in Myanmar from the Himalayas. The land between these ranges houses large river systems and fertile plains. Myanmar's three river systems are the Ayeyarwaddy (the country's longest river), the Salween and the Sittaung. Most of the population and much of the country's agricultural production is in the Ayeyarwaddy valley. The Ayeyarwaddy Delta region is famous for its rice cultivation.

The main population area of the country is usually understood as being divided into two basic geographic areas, Lower Myanmar and Upper Myanmar (which are bounded by hilly regions east and west, and the mountainous, ethnic regions to the north along the Thai and Indian borders). Lower Myanmar is mainly the coastal areas, with their rich, tropical forests. Yangon is located in this region. Upper Myanmar makes up the large interior of the country. Mandalay is the large city here. Situated almost directly north and south of each other, from Yangon to Mandalay is about 648 kilometers. From Mandalay north to the border of China, it's at least that far again, and from Yangon south down to the end of the "finger" of Myanmar along the Thai border, it's nearly that far as well. Myanmar is a big country!

As Khin Khin Myo Chit writes in her book, *Burmese Wonderland*, "It is easy enough to overlook this magic land. Nature has endowed this land with water-falls, rapids, whirlpools, hot-spring, and volcanoes.

There are mountains, gigantic caves, and stately, irresistible rivers. Upon these has fallen the mantle of romance.”



Wild and Domesticated Life

Not that long ago, tigers roamed freely through the forests of Burma, and even around the outskirts of Mandalay and Yangon. Wild boars rooted around in forests and crocodiles ruled the rivers. Travelers to the Golden Land will certainly not see tigers or other dangerous animals prowling the outskirts of Myanmar’s cities anymore. In fact, one will not encounter any at all unless one heads deep into the forest for secluded meditation, or treks far up in to the mountains, where larger animals such as tigers, leopards, wild boars, rhino, antelope and crocodiles can still be found.¹ There are elephants too, which are still domesticated and trained to work in the logging industry.



However, smaller mammals are more abundant, including species of monkeys, foxes and tapirs. Moreover, Myanmar is also home to over 800 species of birds, and its rivers are the home to hundreds of kinds of fish. And as would be expected in a tropical country, one will likely come across some form of wildlife, not to mention various domesticated and semi-domesticated animals.

Animals play an important role in Buddhist tradition, being one of the four lower planes out of the 31 planes of existence. Many Jataka Tales feature stories of the Bodhisattva born into the animal world, such as a monkey, lion, elephant, or tiger. He is often described as being the “king of” his species, indicating to the reader that the future Buddha was great even before his final human life. With this as a backdrop to their culture and the Buddhist religion, Burmese tend to treat animals with respect.

¹ In fact, Myanmar’s less-traveled, more remote areas may be home to one of the world’s most bio-diverse environments—and, up until now, one of the most unexplored as well. This dynamic is treated in BBC’s 2014 documentary *Wild Burma* and by Dr. Alan Rabinowitz’s books *Beyond the Last Village* and *Life in the Valley of Death*.

Several 19th century British administrators commented on the extraordinarily humane treatment of animals they witnessed in Burmese hands. Sir Herbert White connected this behavior to the Buddhist faith, noting that “in all but the most abandoned, traces of the good influence of their religion are evident. One very pleasing effect is extension of benevolence in theory always, in practice often, to every sentient being. Consider, for instance, the kindly attitude of Burmans to lower animals. From the plump bullocks which draw the primitive, creaking carts of the country to the pariah dogs which swarm in every village, or the pigs which used to scavenge the streets of Mandalay... all are objects of compassion and care. The Burman’s robust bullocks, nourished on their mothers’ milk, contrast pleasingly with the lean kind of the Indian. You will even see a pious Burman save a deadly snake from destruction, and set it loose in a place of security. This, perhaps, is an extreme instance of logical regard for principle.”



In Myanmar, even economically struggling Burmese can be seen feeding street dogs scraps, love and respect for all beings being so ingrained into Burmese Buddhist culture. That said, it is something else entirely to dote upon animals, as many readers of *Shwe Lan* probably did with their own pets while growing up. In Myanmar, except in the homes of wealthier families, pets are uncommon, and not fawned over in the same way as pets are in Western countries, especially in the over-the-top ways that this can manifest at times.¹ In Myanmar, animals are seen as living entirely separate from the human realm, meaning they are not to enter human buildings (other than pets in the homes of more well-to-do families). For this reason, as much as a foreign meditator may be a natural dog-lover or cat-lover, and as respectful as some Burmese may be in their treatment of animals, one should be circumspect when approaching animals in Myanmar, and to think twice before petting or holding an animal.² Burmese may see such continual contact as

1 The same may be true of Tibet, as the Dalai Lama once famously pointed out that if New Yorkers treated their neighbors with even half as much kindness as they treated their cats or dogs, peace would prevail in the city.

2 To this, Ma Thanegi comments, “Kids and adults are always wary of dogs they don’t know. Monastery dogs are more uppity and less friendly with people or children than other dogs, even strays, because they are ‘guarding’ their turf. Kids learn early on not to treat monastery dogs like friends unless the boys actually live there. It’s a

dirty and improper, and animals unused to being fondled may react in unpredictable ways.

Animal Treatment

In the same way that human values such as compassion, friendship, and gratitude are expressed differently from one culture to another, so is the “humane” treatment of animals. An anecdote shared by an American yogi who stayed in a Sagaing Hills monastery illustrates this. He recalls how the Sayadaw had been given a small, white, fluffy dog¹ as a present from a lay supporter, and he was quite different than the usual monastery mutt. Every afternoon as the American was mindfully walking around the monastery, he would notice the Sayadaw tearing food into bite-size bits and offering them—by hand—to the dog. From his cultural background, the meditator came to think that the Sayadaw adored this cuddly dog and enjoyed being close even during mealtimes. The reality, as it turned out, was much different.

“One day Sayadaw quoted the scriptures to me,” the American yogi recalls, “and he talked about the corresponding merit one accrues when giving to different beings, such as whether one is giving to an arahant, a monk, a normal human being, etc. He said that even though animals were near the bottom of the list, it was foolish to overlook how they could also aid in one’s spiritual development.” The Sayadaw added that whenever one gives anything to anyone, it is important to make sure that the giving is being done in an appropriate way. As this Sayadaw possessed an uncanny sensitivity and awareness, he had come to see that Myo Gyi rarely got as much food as the other monastery dogs, which were bigger and more aggressive—and also ate faster. It was for this reason the Sayadaw spent every day patiently and tenderly preparing every mouthful the dog could eat, and making sure he received the food directly. As Ma Thanegi comments on the story, “One Buddhist principle is to have Loving Kindness towards all beings. Attachments are called *Ta-hna*, which the ignorant take as meaning only lust but is [actually] about being attached to something or someone. You can only get to Nirvana by discarding all attachments.”

Later the American yogi asked the Sayadaw if he loved the dog in any special way, and if he had been happy to receive this present. The Sayadaw answered that he was not feeding the dog because it had a warm place in his heart as a pet, but because the

different situation at home and the kids’ own dogs would never accompany them to monasteries because they know who rules there.”

1 With the somewhat ironic name of Myo Gyi, after a famous Burmese rocker.

dog was another being in the world that he could serve, and thus develop his own paramis. The American yogi realized that he had interpreted the Sayadaw's actions through his own cultural lens: that of a wonderful owner-pet relationship. In truth, however, the Sayadaw's actions emphasized compassion and service for their own sake, the dog being just the vehicle for it.

■ INSECTS

Insects love hot, humid climates, and so with its hot humid climate, it should come as no surprise that insects also love Myanmar. Mosquitoes are more thoroughly dealt with **here**, and there is no doubt that the traveler in Myanmar will become very well acquainted with what one Western monk in the Thai tradition has termed “Achaan¹ Mosquito.” There are a great many other insects of all colors and shapes, as well as many species of spiders.²

■ GECKOS

The gecko is famous in tropical countries for dining on mosquitoes and other tasty insect morsels. At one point or another, they will probably be a companion in one's living quarters somewhere, and at some time, while one is in the country. Given their epicurean delight in mosquitoes, they act as a natural mosquito coil if one is lucky enough to share one's living quarters with geckoes.

House geckoes make a recognizable *chut, chut* sound. However, the larger variety of striped geckoes makes a wholly unique sound in the animal and insect kingdom: *tucktoo, tucktoo!* For new arrivals in Myanmar, many a traveler has been known to get up in the middle of the night to see who is knocking on the door! B.M. Croker wrote about this local peculiarity in her 1917 novel *The Road to Mandalay*:

“During a momentary pause Shafto was startled by an odd sound—an imperious, unnatural voice that called, ‘Tucktoo! Tucktoo! Tucktoo!’

‘If he gives seven *Tucktoos* without stopping, that is luck—great

1 The Thai word for Sayadaw, the idea being that mosquitoes are a great test for maintaining one's equanimity.

2 The importance of spiders in a famous Shan folktale is related in Chapter 13, where it plays an important role in the origination story of Pindaya Cave.

big luck—but if he goes on, he brings trouble.’¹

‘Only if he stops at an odd number,’ corrected the child.’”

CROWS

Some areas in Myanmar are infested with crows, especially in large trees. They can be especially noisy and disruptive at dusk. This is apparently not a new problem, as American Julius Smith wrote about his experiences in 1890 in *Ten Years in Burma*: “We were wakened early... by the harsh cawing of a myriad of crows, which roost in the shade-trees of the public streets and private yards. We came afterwards to know these annoying pests that swarm over Rangoon all day long, as a tribe of thieves full of all cunning and audacity. The first exhibition of their pilfering given us, was that first morning when the early tea and toast... was passed into our room and placed in reach of the children. The crows had been perched on the window-sill before this, restlessly watching us within the room. But on our turning for a moment from the tray on which the toast was placed, the crows swooped upon it, and carried it off out of the window. This is but a sample of the audacious annoyance suffered from their beaks and claws continually... Were it to our purpose we could write pages of these petty and cunning robberies of which they are guilty.” One Burmese proverb points to the inherent thievery practiced by these dark birds: *te~ do. feyā.; sā. do. šwe jī:* (တင်တော့ ဘုရား၊ စားတော့ ရွှေကျီး). This means “given to a Buddha, snatched by a crow.”

Unfortunately, it has been something of a boyhood rite of passage in parts of Myanmar to shoot crows with a slingshot. Those not so skillful are taunted with the insensitive epithet “*maymisa*,” or “effeminate.” There have been recent attempts to promote the use of cheap lasers in the slingshots’ place, though this has not yet caught on in a major way. It is for this reason that it was suggested in Chapter 2 that yogis pack at least one laser, as one can harmlessly (and humanely) clean the trees of crows. The first sight of a laser beam is usually enough to scatter the entire flock.

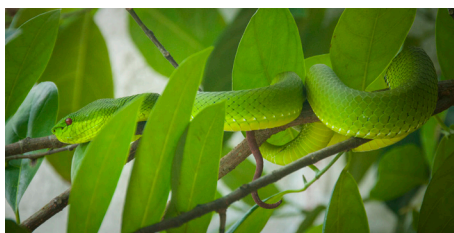


1 Burmese consider the sounds of both kinds of geckoes as lucky.

■ SNAKES

Yes, there are snakes all across the country in Myanmar, and yes, some are poisonous. In **Health**, issues of safety and snakes are described in detail. With basic care, one should have no problems with our slithery friends, and can simply admire their grace and beauty from afar.

The presence of so many snakes in this part of the world connects religion, mythology, the collective unconscious, and health and safety. In Myanmar, the snake has always held a special position. The reptile is frequently seen in traditional Buddhist iconography—a common Buddha statue depicts the enlightened one sitting calmly under a ferocious Naga head.¹ Such an image eloquently speaks to the Buddha's deeply calm mind even in the face of apparent danger, and also references several stories from the scriptures regarding interactions with snakes and Nagas. These statues are common features today at many Burmese pagodas. In fact, some pagodas are well-known primarily for live snakes that have chosen to reside there, and who are believed to have been a monk associated with the site in a former life.



The Naga's Enemy

In Burmese mythology, the *galon* (also called *garuda*, an Indonesian word) is a mythical bird who hunts and kills nagas. Some Burmese think of birds as more powerful than dragons based on the fact that garudas are more powerful than nagas.

■ DOGS

One's welcome to many new villages or monasteries is often a chorus of howling hounds. This was one of the things that surprised the American Bhikkhu Cintita, who observed at Sītāgū Academy

1 It is perhaps not surprising that the Naga is often depicted as resembling the medieval version of a dragon, another animal—though mythical—which took on a highly symbolic role in the society at the time.

in Sagaing that “to announce mealtime, someone would hit a big bell outside the kitchen with a mallet and at that time all of the Sītagū dogs... would take this as cue to point their chins skyward and howl.” In the case of dogs barking at a new arrival, eventually local residents will come over to investigate, whereupon they’ll immediately call the dogs off.



And as one stays in a single location long enough, it will not be this constant, daily headache, as the dogs will become accustomed to one’s presence. This nonsensical—though instinctual—dog barking is such a common feature that there is one expression, *she~ pō ga lū*, (ပိုက်လူ ခွေးဟောင), which means “the dog barks at the man on the elephant.” It refers to exerting effort toward something that will not likely be very effective.

Like Sir White, Harold Fielding compared the status of dogs in Burma to that of India, with the former coming out much more favorably. He wrote: “Coming from half-starved, over-driven India, it is a revelation to see the animals in Burma. The village ponies and cattle and dogs in India are enough to make the heart bleed for their sordid misery, but in Burma they are a delight to the eye. They are all fat, every one of them—fat and comfortable and impertinent; even the ownerless dogs are well fed.”

RESPONSIBLE/CONSCIENTIOUS TRAVEL

One of the joys of being a yogi in Myanmar is that there are reminders of Dhamma practice everywhere. Bus trips start with a five-minute video that guides passengers methodically through the different beings towards which their mettā can be directed. Or, as one is enjoying a hot tea in a café, monks on alms round may pass by, allowing the chance to make merit by presenting an offering. Or, while reading a book in one’s hotel room, sounds of Pāli chanting may drift in and out with the breeze. Past foreign yogis have commented that even subtle acts of mindfulness and generosity were noticed and

appreciated by their Burmese friends, something they found to be wonderful inspiration for further practice. More information about responsible travel within Myanmar can be found at www.tourismtransparency.org.

Besides the mindful attention each yogi can bring for him/herself to one's actions of body, speech, and mind when traveling, the following are some tangible suggestions as to how to one can “travel conscientiously” in Myanmar:

- Where possible, **give your business to locally-owned, “mom-and-pop”** restaurants and shops. This revenue will go towards benefiting the local people more directly. *If you find such a family-run business that serves a good product or goes out of their way to care for you, ask them for permission to pass their contact information onto Shwe Lan for inclusion in the next edition.*
- **Limit one's trash.** When shopping, try to carry re-usable cloth bags, or Shan shoulder bags. Drink from glass bottles rather than plastic. Use less, or no, toilet paper. Trade in a Kleenex for a cloth handkerchief. Limit the use of electricity.
- **Engage people.** Many locals rarely get a chance to interact with a foreigner, and even less so with one who has a real interest in Burmese culture and Buddhism. Because of *ah nah bah deh* (await upcoming Chapter 6, *Burmese Days*), some may be hesitant to take the initiative, although many will be happy to have the opportunity for further cross-cultural interaction.
- **Make an effort to fit in and learn about the local context.** Some past yogis have expressed, “I am only here for serious Dhamma practice,” and so have not endeavored to learn more about their surroundings. This may be appropriate for a recluse, but for those who do not plan to maintain Noble Silence during their entire stay, the effort to understand and integrate into the culture helps to make one's overall practice more rewarding—and this respect for the culture can be understood and appreciated by locals who are more used to seeing tourists staying apart from them and engaging in much different activities. This may include learning key phrases in Burmese, reading Myanmar-related books (see Chapter 6 for



a list of recommended titles), joining in daily monastery tasks, having name cards available when making introductions, and even wearing Burmese clothes.

- **Be generous in a thoughtful way.** For example, one may wish to give in such a way as to not encourage a culture of begging, and which can make for a richer experience than merely handing over money.
- Finally, **keep in touch** with people one meets. Although not everyone will have access to a computer, many will appreciate written correspondence, phone calls, or even items sent with future travelers to the region.

An Unexpected Gift

"After visiting Golden Rock with a friend, I insisted that we head down the pilgrims' trail. I was loaded with several pictures of locals I'd met on the trail the year before and had printed before coming, and I was perhaps more excited about giving these as presents than visiting Golden Rock itself. Not knowing any names of the subjects, I had a vague familiarity with the parts of the trail where I might find the different faces of people I'd met before, but it didn't matter much. We only had to show the picture to anyone, and, well after the initial giggles and excitement, the subject was found, as was everyone else in the near vicinity. Grandmothers to little children and everyone in between, passed the picture around laughing and commenting. Fortunately my friend in tow spoke pretty solid Burmese so we actually got to interact. Several of them remembered me and one family I'd actually gotten to know a bit the year before greeted me like returning family, preparing hot drinks and snacks for the both of us and I'm sure, had we the time, would have lavished us with even more hospitality." Zach Hessler, American yogi







CHAPTER 5

FOOD





*“It is food that you are not content with
although you eat everyday.
It is speech that you cannot deliver properly
although you speak everyday.
It is Dhamma that you do not realize
although it exists really.
Mental sufferings cause physical ones.
Without a calm mind,
you cannot find mental or physical peace.
Keep your mind calm, and be mindful whatever
you do.”*

—Bodhi Tataung Sayadaw

တန်လျင်ဆေး၊လွန်လျင်ဘေး
{ta~ hlye~ shē:, lö~ ye~ bhē:

“Moderate eating is a medicine but
excessive eating is a danger.”



FOOD

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This chapter describes the main cuisine of Myanmar, along with the cuisines of Myanmar's major ethnicities. The ingredients and social significance of some of these foods are distinctive even from its Southeast Asian neighbors. Burmese cuisine is unique in its own right, and will offer some pleasant surprises even to those world travelers who have sampled the cuisines of many other countries.

The chapter also focuses more specifically on the role of food in Burmese Buddhist society and its place at monasteries and meditation centers. In this devout country, some of the most important duties of lay supporters revolve around food preparation, for much of the monks' code of discipline is related to when they may eat and how they may accept nourishment. And even for the yogi intent on secluded meditation in some forest hut, the daily meal becomes the height of sensual pleasure in a day—for this reason, much has been written by Myanmar's great monks and meditation teachers on how to find the Middle Way when it comes to food. Additionally, there are regularly stories of meditators having to leave the Golden Land earlier than expected primarily due to problems with diet. *Shwe Lan*'s hope is that the information in this chapter will allow yogis to maintain their health sufficiently as they delve into the Dhamma to their heart's content.





OVERVIEW

“Sharing borders with China, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh, Burma has been an Asian crossroads—and a place of fascinating layers of food culture—for centuries. The main meal of the day, served at noon, centers around rice. It always includes salads and curries served family-style and shared. This way of eating lunch sums up a lot about Burma. People eat together and share food. There’s no rigid order of courses or dishes; and you can adjust the flavors of what you are eating by dabbing on a chili sauce or squeezing on a little lime juice. In other words, there’s conviviality, generosity, and flexibility.”

—Amazon.com interview with Naomi Duguid,
Burma: Rivers of Flavor

“The food here is great... Although I don’t have any recipes... I think I’ve got them all figured out. Take one cup of oil and one cup of tomato sauce, add a few chilies, a handful of salt and a few grains of rice and you’ve got authentic Burmese cuisine. It makes you squint the first couple of times you try it, but it grows on you...literally! It is also hard to stop eating once you start, sort of like potato chips. I prefer the Burmese food over the special bland and dry ‘foreigner’ food they prepare for us.”

—American monk, in an email describing his new life in robes to friends and family back home

Before arriving in Myanmar for the first time, many yogis expect there will be similarities between Burmese food and Chinese food, or Thai food, or Indian food—in other words, the internationally renowned food cultures that surround its borders. One Travelfish writer tried to pinpoint the nature of Burmese food by suggesting that it “deliciously explains away the culinary transition from South Asia to Southeast Asia.” But while some parts of “Burmese cuisine” throughout the country do share tendencies with the food found in neighboring countries, it is an oversimplified description of a great—and certainly delicious—traditional food culture in its own right, and what is more, it does not account for Myanmar’s many distinct, ethnic cuisines.

Ma Thanegi speaks up for the independent spirit of Burmese food when she notes that “[s]ince Myanmar was ‘discovered’ by modern travelers later than other surrounding countries, outsiders assumed our food was influenced by the food of these bordering places... Outsiders might have seen us far later but it’s not like we came into existence only with their discovery. We have been here for millennium, with our own cultures and cuisine.”

In Myanmar, many of the culture’s daily activities revolve around food: it is mostly bought daily at morning markets, cooked fresh, and eaten immediately due to the tropical climate, intermittent electricity, and general scarcity of refrigerators. And one needs look no further than the common greeting used when meeting a friend, “Have you eaten yet?” (စားပြီပြီလား, *sā: pyī: bī lā:*). This is similar in purpose to “How’s it going?”, and can even be the jumping off point for further small talk about food-related topics.¹

There is also a generous spirit in Burmese culture regarding food. A common expression is *wā< au~ sā:* (ဝေအောင်စား). One can expect to hear this in a Burmese home or when monks and caretakers are looking over one’s shoulder while one eats. It literally means, “eat until you are full” (or alternatively, “eat until you are fat”), and is meant to ensure that the guest has been fully taken care of and is leaving more than satisfied with the offerings.



1 For example, if one replies “yes,” then the conversation can turn to the meal just eaten and one’s assessment of it; if “no,” then the conversation might well turn to asking about his/her day’s dining plans.

So then, what is “Burmese food?” The following section presents a fuller picture of *Bamar* cuisine, and touches upon some of the other ethnic traditions as well.

The Sweet Powder

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) can be a common ingredient in Burmese cooking, and many restaurants and stalls have a can of it in their kitchen to enhance the flavors of the dish. “MSG” in Burmese is translated literally as “sweet powder.” Many Western yogis, on the other hand, wish to avoid it. If you don’t want any in your food, politely ask that it not be added. Simply say, “*achō hmou~. mā the. ne*” (အချိုပျဉ်း မထည့်နဲ့.). If this phrase is not understood, another option is to motion that you do not want any “Ajimoto”, the most known brand that includes MSG flavoring. Note that at monasteries, however, it may not be appropriate to make such requests where kitchens follow traditional practices, cook for large numbers, or accept local donations.

BAMAR CUISINE

“Our society is about sharing food. Neighbors will send special dishes to each other; distribute desserts during the New Year festival to all the neighbouring houses or flats in the building or send by car to friends living afar. [People] eat lunch boxes together at work or college or school and share the food.”

—Ma Thanegi

In general, a Bamar meal consists of several distinct dishes. There are usually one or more curries and **salads**, one large bowl of **soup broth** with perhaps light veggies or glass noodles, and fruit or some other local sweets served at the end with tea and jaggery (raw date, cane or palm sugar). Most Burmese dishes are prepared from scratch with local and seasonal ingredients, creating fresh, bracing flavors. Over the past several centuries, new foods and spices have arrived with travelers and immigrants from China, India, and Europe in particular, with many of these taking root in Burmese cuisine. There is a Burmese expression stating that although “the street may be the same but the taste of the curry is not.” So while one might find some common dishes during one’s travels in Myanmar, their taste will always be something different and unique to appreciate.

Curries, ဟင်း, *he~*:

မိန့်ရာ ဟင်းကောင်း ၊ ခင်ရာ ဆွေမျိုး

myei~ yā he~: kau~, khe~ yā shwe myō:

“Good appetite makes a great meal and
good friends become family!”

Situated geographically between India and Thailand, it's not surprising that Bamar curry dishes share characteristics of each. And yet, while usually referred to in English as curry, they are not always reminiscent of the Indian or Thai dishes that are often associated with the word. Most often cooked in a gravy base of oil with well-pounded chilies, ginger, and onions, Burmese curries come in a variety of combinations of vegetables, fish, and meat. They are unique from their neighbors in several ways: they do not often use ingredients commonly found in Thai curries such as lemongrass, coconut milk, and galangal,¹ and also tend to be thicker; they seldom use those ingredients commonly associated with Indian curries, like garlic, ginger, lime, turmeric, curry powder, and coriander; and in general do not serve steamed dishes as is found in China. Typically, Burmese curries are also saltier and more pungent than either Indian or Thai curries. They usually use more onions as well; one source has noted that Myanmar has the highest per-capita rate of onion consumption in the world! Finally, fish paste, *ngapi*,² is used in many Burmese curries—except, of course, in vegetarian recipes.



1 This is a ginger-like root, and while not used often in Bamar dishes, it is found in Rakhine food. However, one shared trait with Thai cuisine are the fresh herbs and leaves, used either for flavoring or dipped in a sauce, and often served as a condiment.

2 So integrated is *ngapi* into Burmese culture that one hears the proverb *myě. hnā ti, ṇa pi mā wě hne~*. (မျှော်နှာထိ၊ ငါးပိမဝယ်နဲ့), or “Never buy fish paste from a familiar acquaintance.” This is equivalent to the English warning of not to mix family with business. Colonialists, however, were none to fond of the snack, as evidenced by Sir Herbert White’s chauvinistic statement in 1913 that it was “a composition of fish suffered to decompose and prepared in many ways, all equally malodorous in result.”

At meals, curry dishes are prepared separately and served in small amounts for people to take as they wish. When eating at monasteries or in homes, one may have a choice of anywhere between four and a dozen or so dishes; restaurants may pre-cook several dozens. It was said that the Burmese king Nara Thihapate insisted on as many as 300 curries at each meal! Monastery leftovers are sometimes served by mixing together all remaining curries with rice, a meal known as *hinlay*. As Maung Kyaa Nyo says in *Presenting Myanmar*, “I can’t find words to give an exact description of its unique and delicious taste. Suffice it to say I still think of it now and then with a deep yearning!”

However much one ends up enjoying Burmese curries, it’s helpful to keep the proverb *hin sar kyee* in mind, which literally means “eating too much curry.” It refers to the glutton who is considered greedy and uncouth, by stuffing themselves with too much food rather than eating in a more mindful and refined way.

A Cat House

Burmese rarely store food overnight, due to the dogs, dust, insects, heat, and lack of modern appliances. However, it is still necessary to keep food protected for several hours, for people are often served at scattered times. One way to do this is by putting the food in “cat safes” or “cat house” (cau~ ei~, ကြောင်အိမ်), which are small cupboards that have sealed doors and mesh on the sides. The four legs rest in small earthen bowls half filled with water, to prevent ants or cockroaches from climbing up; though deteriorating the furniture faster is a necessary sacrifice. Another thing that the Burmese commonly do is place the food under a large cover that has slits to allow airflow, but too small for any insects to penetrate. Traditional covers are made from bamboo and shaped like large conical hats (called ou. shau~: / zə gā:, အုပ်ဆောင်း), while more modern ones come in cheap plastic.

The Art of Enjoying a Burmese Meal

“At a meal there’s no need to change the flavor of any of the served dishes with lime juice or chili sauce, as these are also not present when a meal is laid out unless it’s a one-dish meal like noodles. The various curries, salads, fries, etc. all have different flavors and taste already. You change each mouthful by which curry or salad you are combining with the rice in your fingers or spoon before you push all of it into your mouth.” Ma Thanegi

Salads, အသုပ်, *ətou*.

“Salads are one of the glories of the cuisine no matter where you are in Burma. They’re flavored with fried shallots, roasted peanuts, lime juice, and more. Noodle dishes, often served with a broth and a wonderful array of condiments, are another common thread. In all the food there’s a subtle dance and balance between tart, salty, and sweet, with a touch of chile heat.”

—Amazon.com interview with Naomi Duguid,
author of *Burma: Rivers of Food*

ရှောက်သီးသုပ် သံပုရာသီးနုင
ṣau. tī: tou., tə~ pə yā/rā tī: hñi.

“Dressing citron salad with lime juice,” the equivalent of the English phrase of “painting coal black”

In Myanmar cuisine, “salad” refers to any dish that is prepared and served raw, often with some light flavoring. As one foreign visitor wrote, “If the Burmese can grow it, pick it, harvest it, raise it, ferment it, or just simply stumble upon it, they have probably already made a salad out of it.” Salads are prepared simply by mixing everything together thoroughly, usually by hand. In fact, the Burmese word for salad, *tou*, literally means “mixed by hand.” And while the Burmese curry may be somewhat familiar to those who know Thai and Indian food (even with its distinct differences), the Burmese salad is quite a unique taste experience.

Salads are usually served and eaten alongside curries. Anything is game for inclusion, from local flowers and herbs to unripe fruit to citrus and nuts. Just some examples of ingredients found in Burmese salads are: tamarind leaves, lemon and onion, pomelo, pennywort, green mango, green or red tomato, ginger, eggplant, white fungus, and morning glory. Many salads are vegetarian, although some may contain a small amount of shrimp or fish paste, and in rare cases, cooked meat. Vegetarians may want to politely decline the raw prawn salad and pig ears salad! Salads can also include cooked noodles, especially **Shan noodles**, which are mixed with the raw ingredients rather than being fried or put in soup.

Water Moss Salad

Zao Amat Long (1854-1905) is respected as one of the most renowned Shan poet scholars. Shan Buddhist writing is known for its floral quality, where writers can be playful and creative with their words, even when commenting on the sacred scriptures. Amat Long's ability to make the Dhamma relevant to local contexts was on full display in his 1875 interpretation of a Sub-Commentary of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. In Paragraph 267, he writes that “free thought” is “able to temporarily destroy or overcome the defilements. Out of these, there are immoral thought, mundane resultant thought and indeterminate thought, which are in complex with defilements, being dark and dirty like sour ‘water moss salad.’” Moss salad is *ti sa* in the Shan language. Jotika Khur-Yearn explains in *The Poetic Dhamma of Zao Amat Long's Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* that by “using this simile [...] his audience can imagine how ‘water-moss-salad’ looks like.”

And what does moss salad look like? Ma Thanegi explains that “it looks like fat little strands, brown or dark green, [and they] have to soak in water to plump up, and we wash [them] carefully in lots of water to remove [the] sand. Sourness is what we put in if we want, although it's not naturally sour. Sort of a nutty taste... crunchy.”

Soup, ဟင်းချို, *he~: chö*

One may find the Western term “soup” not very descriptive of Burmese “soup.” Rather than a large bowl with vegetables and meat that may be a meal unto itself, or something consumed as a first course, the Burmese serve clear, broth- or consommé-like soups with the main course at every meal.¹ *Hingga* tends to refer to a hot peppery soup, while *hincho* is usually milder in taste. Burmese soups often have a tart flavor, usually from lime or tamarind, and are meant to be a contrastive taste to the curry. Various herbs or spices may be added depending on the dishes it will be eaten with. At restaurants, soup is



1 Other than Kachin and Karen States, where the soups tend to be much heartier.

usually complimentary, as it is considered almost like a condiment to help “wash down” the rice and main meal. For this reason, it is often served along with other common condiments such as pickled and raw vegetables, chutneys, oils, spices and pastes. One popular kind of soup comes with glass noodles and quail eggs. Local writer Hpone Thant, now living in Australia, noted “I have had many experiences of taking out Westerners to a typical Myanmar restaurant and what they will do is drink up the soup as a first course! I had to explain our custom that we mix the curries and salad with rice, and soup is just like liquid to wash the rice down.”

■ MOHINGA

“This fish broth is fragrant with lemongrass and pepper, and Myanmar people can hardly go a week without it—I know I can’t.”

Ma Thenegi, *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*



If Myanmar has a national dish, it is certainly mohinga. The noodle soup has a ubiquitous feel: it can be eaten as a meal or snack, ordered at a restaurant or market stall, and served at either home or monastery.

The style of the mohinga is often determined by its unique garnish, which can include boiled egg, gourd fritters, fried peas, shredded garlic, roasted chili powder, shredded leeks, coriander leaves, turmeric, lemon grass, lime, and banana plant.¹ As Ba Than writes in *Myanmar Attractions and Delights*, “each region, each town, even each reputable shop has its own secret recipe to make it distinct and attractive.” Coastal regions tend to have more fish while the Mandalay area appreciates more of a thick broth with a dal-like taste. The Dawei have a local leaf called *lankaung* that they place in it, and the Rakhines like it so spicy there is even a proverb derived from the dish, *ā pū ṣā pū* (အပူ ၾပူ), meaning “hot palate, hot tongue concoction.” Myaungmya style uses fish caviar from the *nga tha lout*

1 However, be careful that when offering mohinga to monks, any condiments should be pre-added. This is because some, such as Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, feel that monks should not add any leaves or herbs to a mohinga bowl themselves since this could be seen as “cooking,” and that doing so would be in violation to their Vinaya.

fish. But overall, Yangon is considered to make the best in the country. And wherever it is made, mohinga is most often cooked in aluminum or steel so that it can be served while still piping hot.

Unfortunately for vegetarian foreign yogis, mohinga is almost always prepared with a fish broth. Thankfully, some exceptions substitute bean powder. Additionally, monasteries may prepare a vegetarian version from time to time, and there are various stalls throughout the country that make a non-fish version. One of the most locally famous mohinga restaurants in Yangon also has a vegetarian option (see upcoming Chapter 9.1 for location information). On the other hand, when enjoying mohinga, even non-vegetarians are wise to heed the Burmese proverb *ṇā: tei. myā:; he~: hou~* (ငါးသိပ်များဟင်းဟုန်), which can be translated as “Too much fish makes the broth unsavory.” This Buddhist-inspired saying points to the notion that having too much of sensual pleasures leads to excess glut.

One type of noodles that has long been popular is *shwe taung khauk swe*, named after its town Shwetaung just south of Pyay on the Ayeyarwaddy River. It is an egg noodle dish in a small quantity of clear broth, with a dash of coconut cream and spices. The original shop that made these noodles received a loyal customer in the form of the nation’s president, who once arranged for Myanmar’s stall to serve it at an Osaka Trade Fair in Japan.



Another famed noodle dish is *ohno khaukswe*, often called “coconut noodles”. It is easier to find vegetarian versions of this, although it can be oilier than mohinga. A fun fact is that *ohno khaukswe* doesn’t actually use coconut water as many would assume, but rather the milky liquid squeezed from fresh coconut meat. Some make coconut noodles with evaporated milk, as it affects cholesterol levels less than coconut milk. Generally speaking, the lowland southern regions use more coconut milk in their dishes than elsewhere in the country.

Rice, ထမင်း, ၊ ၵhəme~:

“The art of taking a Myanmar rice meal is in itself an art, because it calls for leisure and a relaxed state of mind. One cannot do justice to a rice meal if one is in a hurry, or if one’s mind is not wholly on the business of eating.”

—Khin Myo Chit, *Colorful Myanmar*

As might be expected about the cuisine of an Asian country such as Myanmar, rice is the staple food not only of Bamar cuisine, but also a centerpiece of most of Myanmar’s other culinary traditions. U Sarana discovered that during the Kobaung Period (1752-1885), there were 126 varieties of rice cultivated in Myanmar, and each had a specific taste! With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, increased international trade and access became the impetus for turning the once-swampy Myanmar delta into a fertile land of productive rice fields. Burma became the leading rice exporter in the world, when it was known as the “Rice Bowl of Asia.”¹

Rice and Buddhism have been closely connected for millennia. The rice served at monasteries is the most common alms food to be found in any Buddhist country; it’s practically a synonym for “alms.” Rice is central to one of the most important and sacred practices within the Buddhist faith, and occurs in every village and city on every single day, when even the poorest of the poor are able to offer spoonfuls of rice to monks on their morning rounds. This alms-giving ritual, taking place since the Buddha’s time, links the small, humble rice grain to their great religion in the minds of many Southeast Asian Buddhists.

Several Burmese proverbs illustrate how one’s home store of rice can be a reminder for those seeking to lead a humble life. One goes *mau. lo~: tē. sha~, phei. tī* (မောက်လွန်းတဲ့ဆန် ဖိတ်တယ်), meaning “the overfilled rice tends to spill,” figuratively suggesting that an overly proud person brings himself down. Another is



1 Rice is still king today: of the 8 million hectares of cereal crops in Myanmar today, only half a million are *not* rice! (the others are corn, wheat, millet, sesame, and sunflower)

Sha~ mā ši, əsā: jī: (ဆန်မရှိ၊ အစားကြီး), meaning “no rice at a home, but a big eater,” and is used for people who squander their possessions. Finally, there is the good practical advice of *tu. ǝ: hne~. tu. sha~, ʔa~ you~* (သူ့အိုးနှင့် သူ့ဆန်၊ တန်ရှိ); this means that “The pot and amount of rice should be of equal size,” or simply “live within your means.”

In practical terms, rice is ingested in just about every way one can imagine, at just about every meal: boiled or steamed, kneaded into dough and wrapped around sweets, fashioned into noodles or crepes, even distilled into moonshine. It also is a core feature of Burmese culture, a fact that can be seen in many ways. The Burmese word most commonly used for food in the vernacular is *htamin*¹, which is also the word for rice, and “to eat” is *ʔhame~: sā:* (ထမင်းစား), or “eat rice.” When mixed with oil and salt, rice is often the very first solid food that Burmese infants will taste, and the mother will also sometimes sing this little ditty, “Please oh silvery moon, please provide us with a golden tray topped with rice rolled in oil”, (*Po Lamingyi ye, htamin si sann shwe linpan ne pay par*). Even leftover rice has many uses—lightly fried with eggs or beans and, as a last resort, given to monastery dogs, stray cats, or the neighborhood crows.

In earlier times, kings inaugurated the first rice tilling of the year. They personally plowed the royal fields in full regalia in front of the entire court, symbolizing the cultural importance of rice. The earliest rice flakes were then mixed with sugar and coconut and sprinkled with warm water before being eaten, or stored for months to be served at another auspicious time. Today, rice stimulates nostalgic cultural and personal memories for many Burmese. Khin Myo Chit writes that “[M]y heart leaps up when I behold hot steaming glutinous rice heaped in a bamboo basket lined with fresh green banana leaves; the aroma is something that goes straight to my heart and down into my stomach, making my mouth water.”

Rice is so beloved that some eat it even after ordering a plate of noodles! As one Burmese-American comments, “Sometimes you can see locals order the soupy noodle based dishes, and a side of rice.



1 The dictionary word for “food” in Burmese is not *htamin*, it’s *əṣā: əṣā* (အစားအစာ). However, the word “rice” is used commonly to refer to food, somewhat similar to how “break bread” means eat (anything) in English, and how *gohan* (also “rice”) is a common stand-in for the more formal word for food (*tabemono*) in Japanese.



They'll pour their noodle soup based dish on the rice and eat it together. I can't explain why this dish would need more carbohydrates, but sometimes this mix tastes so right! Needless to say, rice is king.”

Rice is often served in bowls in homes before the eating of the meal actually begins. Guests may be served a heaping portion. If it looks to be too much, it is considered more polite to request a smaller portion *before* one starts eating than to leave any on the plate. The other dishes will then be spread out on the table, and most often the eater helps him or herself, though sometimes the guest is served directly.

■ VARIETIES OF RICE

Most strains of Burmese rice are starchier than Thai jasmine or basmati rice. In the words of Claudia San Lwin, “the quality of the rice cultivated ranges from the stout, reddish kernels of the swidden plots to the slender, translucent grains favoured in many parts of the Shan State.” *Pan hsan hmway nga kwei*, and *ei mahta* are considered the best quality and most expensive strains, and *ηə zei~* (ငစ်နီ) is also popular as it is cheap and often used when making rice snacks. However, this grain must be eaten within an hour after cooling or else it becomes rough and hard to chew.

Another common variety of rice is a shorter grain, glutinous rice, also called “sticky rice,” which is especially enjoyed in eastern Shan State. There is *mou~. phē. thou.* (မုန့်ဖက်ထုပ်), a tasty treat sold cheaply at most Burmese markets, in which the glutinous steamed rice paste is wrapped around a sweet inside, such as black beans, bananas, coconuts, or jaggery. These are cooked inside and then covered with a banana leaf. Glutinous rice can also be cooked in hollowed-out green bamboo tubes, in which peas may be added before it is roasted on an open fire, and then eaten by slicing the tube open. Sometimes before the rice is served, fresh *pandan* leaves¹ will be placed on it, lending a nice aroma to the bowl. Two additional glutinous strands are *shī thāme~*: (ဆီထမင်း), which is cooked in an oil and water mixture and eaten with fried fish and meat, and *swe thāme~*: (ရွှေထမင်း), known as golden rice, is cooked with coconut and sugar and enjoyed as a dessert.²

1 An herb thought to have originated in the Philippines, used to flavor rice amongst other uses.

2 There are even special Burmese proverbs for the glutinous strand, such as *kaouq*

Finally, there's Shan rice, which is different from most other strains of Burmese rice: it is more starchy and sticky, resembling Japanese sushi rice, and believed by some to be more nutritious. It is especially loved for its variety and flavors, which may owe to being planted in the fresh rainwater enjoyed by Shan state, rather than in water from irrigation channels, which were constructed across the so-called Dry Zone area around the 11th century.

Pounding rice, pounding... people?

In the past, harvested rice was put in a mortar about two feet high—and sometimes as tall as an average man—a little at a time. It was then pounded with a pestle for many hours, or until the husk could be fully removed from the rice. This process was repeated many times until the rice was white and ready to be cooked. From this time-consuming and probably back-breaking process came the Burmese proverb, *sha~ p̄sū/byū sha~ kau~; ṭhau~: hma ti, lū acau~: pau~: hma ti* (ဆုံဖြူ ဆုံကောင်း ထောင်းမှသိ၊ လူအကြောင်း ပေါင်းမှသိ), meaning, “just as you only know if the rice is good after pounding, so you only know a person's quality after spending time with him/her.”¹

Glutinous Rice

For Burmese, January marks the gathering of the first harvest, known as *kuak nyin*. This is then donated to monasteries for merit, and a great competition known as *htama nei* is held between different communities. With a traditional *doebut* musical performance urging them on, a wide variety of ingredients such as coconut shavings, sesame seeds, groundnuts, and sliced ginger are added to a large wok, while women prepare individual plates for monks. When completed, the lay community formerly offers the finished product to the *Sayadaw* of the local monastery, and also distributes it to every household in the community.

hnyin ga ma se. San Kyan ga se. This means that “the glutinous rice becomes less sticky while the ordinary rice cries to be more sticky,” and refers to an unqualified person who boasts loudly, while the real qualified ones are silent; or can also indicate such scenarios as when someone isn't concerned (e.g., about their own health) when they probably should be, while others, like his parents, are worried for him.

1 U Sarana explains that this comes from a sutta in *Samyutta Nikaya* (Kosala Samyutta, SN 1.3.2.1. *Sattajātīla S.*), where the Buddha explains to King Kosala that one knows the other only after associating them for certain time.



A Crown of Rice

“In villages rice is cooked in earthen pots with humped lids. So when the rice is cooked, the topmost part takes the shape of the lid. This part of the rice rises higher than the rest and forms a peak. This crown of the rice pot is reserved for the highest and noblest—the Lord Buddha. The offering of the crown of rice with fruits and sweets is made at the household shrine. On the three-legged lacquer tray are miniature alms bowls and flower vases and candles. As the older sister puts finishing touches to offerings, the youngest sister strikes the triangular brass gong to declare to all sentient beings that a good deed has been done.” Khin Myo Chit, *Colorful Myanmar*

Kauk hnyin paung kaung thaw lei, hnan daung ka pyet.

“Although [the steamed sticky rice] is good indeed,
there is no ground sesamum.”

(In other words, one is never satisfied.)





Fruits and Vegetables

hmö yā< t̃ě. myě. hnā

မှို ရတဲ့ မျက်နှာ

“A face beaming like one who has found an armful of mushrooms.”

“Though you couldn’t find your dhamma satisfactorily, you’ll surely see it in a day. The fruit is not yet ripe and [has] no smell, no color, no good taste and when it is ripe it will be with color, taste and smell.” Saya U Than, Lectures on Samathā and Vipassanā.¹



Due to its tropical location, Myanmar is blessed with a wide variety of fruit and vegetables. Strolling through any produce market, one will undoubtedly find many of the shapes and flavors a totally novel experience!

The kinds of vegetables and other produce that are available are seasonal, though some types of fresh vegetables are always plentiful. Carrots, red radishes, potatoes, tomatoes, string beans, okra, wild mushrooms, cauliflowers, eggplants, cabbage, cucumbers, bitter melon, zucchini and other gourds, lettuce, broccoli, watercress, and onions are just a few common domestic vegetables. Herbs such as roselle and pennywort are commonly used for soups as well as to flavor main dishes. Many other local kinds of herbs are used liberally as farmers simply walk into their paddy field and pick things to toss into the cooking pot.

¹ The quote is attributed to U Nyo, who said this to Saya Thet Gyi after returning home to Pyaw Bwe Gyi village after thirteen years of intensive meditation practice, yet was frustrated with the results of his efforts.

Additionally, a wide variety of fruit is available year-round because the country's varied geography has such a wide range of climates. Owing to its nutritious soil, Shan State has an especially rich supply of fruits, in particular its strawberries—although these are best to enjoy when visiting the area, as they do not hold up well on Myanmar's poor roads. One can even find apples in this tropical country; less surprisingly, nearly a dozen different kinds of bananas are available all year round (see below).

Citrus is also abundant, with many strains of oranges, tangerines, pomelo, and grapefruit. In her book *Myanmar, In My Father's Footsteps*, Pauline Hayton attests to the deliciousness of the Burmese citrus: "I come from Florida, famous for its citrus crops, but I have to say the tangerines, oranges and grapefruit I ate in Myanmar were first-rate." There are also wonderfully sweet and juicy types of guava, watermelon, grapes, pineapple, and papaya. Other tropical fruits new to the first-time visitor include jackfruit, mangosteen, custard apple, starfruit, rambutan, lychee, persimmon, marian, durian, and dragonfruit. And some fruits are even prepared for main meals, such as the salads made from ripe mango and papaya, as well as the curries made from young jackfruit flesh and seeds from ripened ones.



Burmese don't often drink fruit juice, in spite of all the fruit growing in their country, though it can be found at places that cater to foreigners. If you order one, and don't want milk (*nwano ma hte ne*) or sugar (*thagya ma hte ne*) added, be sure to inform them. Fortunately, fresh coconut water is easily found—and not only is it very refreshing, but it also is one of the healthiest things to have on a hot day. After finishing the liquid, one can ask the seller to split the coconut open and carve out the flesh to munch on.

A Taste for the Sour

Burmese eat some fruits before they ripen, when the flavor is still quite astringent, often dipping it in a mix of chili powder and salt. This is the case with green tomatoes, green mangoes, plums, and guava.

BANANAS

As might be expected in a tropical country, bananas are king. The many varieties of Burmese bananas are all quite distinct:

- ***Pheegyan*** (or “coarse plantain”) is rich in fiber and enjoyed by the very young as well as those in their advanced years. These are also the most commonly used for ceremonial purposes. And for many Burmese, this banana is their very first solid food, when it is mashed with soft rice and oil. They are also the cheapest: for those who can’t afford a full meal at roadside stalls, they may make a meal with several of these. In Mandalay, the *pheegyan* are fried in batter or on their own until they reach a golden brown color.
- ***Rakhine*** is very sweet, though not recommended for those with digestive problems. These tend to be rounder in shape and have a rich yellow color.
- ***Thee hmway*** (“fragrant fruit”) come in either green or yellow and have a bright white skin. The best usually come from Toungoo or the Delta region.
- ***Gold Banana*** is called the “father of bananas” as it is quite large and is deep red in color. Strangely, these have been sold in American produce markets as a “man banana.”
- ***Sargalay*** (“young sparrow”) are named after these tiny birds for their small size.
- ***Sour bananas*** are what their name implies.
- ***Nantharbu*** are gold-colored and sweet in taste.

Bananas can be soaked in water to speed up the ripening process, but once ready, eat them quickly, because they do not last more than a day or two in the tropical heat! This is also why bananas are mostly available throughout fruit stands in the morning, because sometimes they are not even as fresh by the afternoon!

Bananas also play an important role in Buddhist life. Many foods are steamed in, eaten on, and even wrapped and carried, in banana leaves, which make appropriate individual offerings to monks. Along with the coconut, it is one of the main offerings giv-



en at festivals. And even the trees themselves can move Burmese to eloquence; as Khin Myo Chit once noticed that “[b]anana groves are beauty spots in the garden. They are cool and restful in the daytime, its gigantic oblong leaves waving welcome. On moonlit nights silvery beams dance on the leaves swaying in the breeze. It is a romantic scene, you almost expect a nymph to flit out of the growth.”

The Buddha and Bananas

The Buddha once used the banana tree as a metaphor for something that—however woody it may appear on the outside—is ultimately hollow. Because there is no actual wood in the banana tree, it was used as a simile for those religious teachings where there was no real “essence.”

ပိန္နဲပင် ဆွဲမထည့်နဲ့

pei~ nē pe~, shwě mā thě. nē.

“Leave my jackfruit tree out of it!”

Terrific Tamarind

The tamarind tree, common throughout South and Southeast Asia, produces a sour-tasting bean that can be made into a liquid or paste. Tamarind can be found in salads, used to garnish soups, or pounded into a pulp to mix with chilies and fish paste. There are also recipes for cooking its pulp: a well-known one combines it with jaggery (raw palm sugar) to make a kind of sherbet. In the upcountry region, tamarind is mixed with water and palm sugar (in liquid form) and drank as a juice. Most fortunately, tamarind can be eaten by monks—as well as yogis on eight precepts—at any time of the day, as it is not considered a food.

Indeed, tamarind trees give generously to Burmese village life in many ways. Children love playing in the tamarind’s gnarled branches, and its seeds can be found in everything from handicrafts to traditional games. And Burmese elephant handlers, known as “oozies”, were always well aware that their timber-hauling elephants loved to stop in the forest for a time to munch on tamarind pulp. Tamarind even has Buddhist implications, as its pulp is used to protect bronze images at shrines. The pulp is mixed with water and applied like a varnish, and is said to be better than normal soap, which eventually wears away the shine.

The Delicious Durian

The very strong-smelling and different-tasting durian, one of the more expensive fruits, has polarized opinion and separated East from West for the last few centuries. For some, it is the “ambrosia of the Gods” and the “king of fruit.” Others revile and wouldn’t allow the vile thing into the house under any circumstances. Local belief posits that if you don’t bathe after eating them, it can cause boils, since it is a “hot” fruit. It was said that during the days of the royal court, the king would charter an entire steamer tasked only with the safe delivery of this fruit. And in later years, when railroad tracks were being laid throughout the country, one minister commented, “Excellent; then we shall be able to get our durians fresh.”

On the other side of the durian debate, J. George Scott wrote that “[s]ome Englishmen will tell you that the flavour and the odour of the fruit may be realised by eating a ‘garlic custard’ over a London sewer; others will be no less positive in their perception of blendings of sherry, noyau, delicious custards, and the nectar of the gods, while a somewhat objectionable smell is regarded as doing no more than suggest, or recall, a delightful sensation.”

‘Pride of Pyay’

Khin Myo Chit calls the custard apple the “pride of Pyay” and notes that Pho Oo Taung Hill there is covered with custard apple trees. She writes that “the enjoyment of this exotic fruit needs a special technique; each section of the pulp can be quite easily scooped out by just following the pattern on the rind. But ay, here is the rub; to relish the flavor, the eater has to suck the pulp off the tiny black seed, which is a potential danger to the gullet; the seed has to be spat out without breaking any etiquette rules, if possible. The little morsel of the pulp on the seed, sweet and savory though it may be, melts in the mouth even before you begin to enjoy it. The temptation to put many seeds in one mouthful must be resisted, however tantalizing it might be.”



An Array of Avocados

Avocados grow in abundance in Taunggyi and Kalaw. Their season is from mid-October to mid-February, when they are cheap and plentiful. However, Burmese do not eat avocados alone or as a vegetable, but rather mix them with sweet condensed milk to serve as a dessert drink. If you have the time, your Burmese friends may enjoy learning how to make guacamole or avocado salad as all the ingredients that can be found locally. This can also be a nice treat to offer to make at a monastery where you stay.

A Multitude of Mangoes

Mangoes are most plentiful from March to July, and come in many varieties. Most Burmese can readily identify the subtle difference in flavors and each has his or her favorites, from machitsu (Ms. Cutey) to sein ta lone (One Diamond, and only “discovered” a few decades ago) to mya kyout (Emerald Stone). Others are named after certain people, such as Aung Din.¹ Mangoes can be served at every stage of their development: in addition to enjoying the ripened fruit in all its sweetness, there is also green mango salad and pickled mangoes with spices.



The mango not only goes back to the Buddha’s time, but he also referenced them in his teachings. There is a well-known story from the Visudhimagga where mangoes feature prominently. An elderly monk who was extremely tired and hungry came upon a mango grove, with many of the savory fruits lying on the ground. But in spite of his grave condition, he did not take any, for doing so would have been against his code of Vinaya as there was no layperson around to offer them.

¹ Aung Din is a historical figure who apparently grew a strain of mangoes that were well-liked by the King. Today, this is one of the most popular varieties.

Monk Matters

Offering fruit to a monk is a fine way to make merit. One should be careful to do so before noon, and, unless it is damaged already, it is also necessary to utter the Pāli phrase, “kappiyam bhante,” which literally means “It is proper, sir.” In reply, the monk may say “kappiyam karohi,” which means “make it proper.” While saying “kappiyam, bhante,” the lay person should symbolically damage a part of the fruit.¹ This is because monks are not to take fruit in which they will eat (i.e. “kill”) the “living” seeds. By uttering this formulaic Pali phrase, one thereby indicates that one has already split (or “killed”) the seed upon offering. The words are then accompanied by a physical action;² and the donor should symbolically damage one of the fruits (either its seed, or even just the skin—or if giving multiple fruits, to do so with just one piece. Alternatively, one may avoid this altogether by giving fruit that is already cut to monks. U Sarana explains that this “when the matter is food, it is the privilege of lay people that they may prepare, or ‘cook’, food, or that they may ‘destroy’ those seeds before offering it to monks to consume it. This tradition has been developed to appease people who profess life in seeds, and at the same time to make it easy for laity to offer fruit to monks.”



1 The Buddha proscribed this could be done by fire, by a knife, or by one's nails.

2 This is the general procedure. There are various exceptions and details governing this act in the Vinaya that are not described in the text, and those interested can always ask a monk for more information.

Snacks

“Myanmar travelers always take along some home-cooked food, not trusting the shops or the travel company for good cooking. The people, however poor, are seldom careless about meals.”

—Ma Thanegi, *The Native Tourist*

Burmese cuisine features a large number of delicious snacks made from an astonishingly wide variety of ingredients—they’re certainly not just like chips and other junk food! They are eaten at all times of the day. They are common at festivals, as well as shared at social and religious gatherings. They can be bought at food stalls or from peddlers pushing their wares through town.



For Those with a Sweet Tooth

Traditional Burmese sweets are usually made from rice flour or tapioca, and may include coconut, peanuts, semolina, or poppy seeds. Another favorite sweet is Faluda, a sweet drink that originated in Iran and made its way east through India. The Burmese version includes rose syrup, cooked tapioca, agar agar jelly, basil seeds, milk, sugar, and ice cream. Some also enjoy the Indian-influenced kulfi, a dish similar to ice cream. Shwe kyi, or rich semolina, is a popular dessert served especially at large feasts and on religious occasions.

One long-time Burmese expat, now living in Australia, notes, “Burmese love snacks, either savories or sweets. When I was young, when we would hear a loud cry from a vendor coming into our neighborhood, we would run down and call out to stop the vendor. Usually that vendor would carry his/her goods in the basket on his/her head gracefully. They would bring out the goods from the basket, usually still warm. At the night market or near the pwe (street theatre), one can always find these wonderful sweet and savory snacks to enjoy the night away.”

PICKLED TEA LEAF SALAD (လတ်ဖတ်, *lə phë., laphet*)

Pickled or fermented tea leaves, *laphet*, is one of the most culturally significant Burmese foods, as well as one of the most relished. It will be encountered frequently in the pilgrim's travels throughout the Golden Land, along with its typical, accompanying condiments, such as peanuts, toasted sesame, dried shrimp, fried peas, roasted beans, tomatoes, and shredded ginger. It is served gratis at restaurants, the first thing offered one at a Burmese home or monastery, and is a must at any important Buddhist ceremony. *Laphet* is sold in bulk in markets, often accompanied by sealed packets of the various condiments.

Though fermented, *laphet* does not have a strong taste, and is almost never served alone. In traditional settings it is presented in a lacquer bowl, where it comes surrounded by compartments containing the various condiments. However, *laphet* can also be served as part of a meal. In salad form, it is mixed with the above condiments, and then fresh tomatoes, garlic, chilies and other vegetables are added; it can also mixed with rice to give flavor and sustenance. For an especially savory delight, *laphet* is drizzled with sesame oil and mixed with salty, crunchy peanuts and peas.

In the traditional way of making *laphet*, after the tea leaves are picked, they are steamed and then mashed by hand on bamboo platforms. The mashed tea is then placed in a large hole in the ground that has been lined with bamboo and fresh tree leaves. After being spread evenly and tamped down hard, a heavy wooden lid is placed on top, with large stones added to increase the weight.

The significance of *laphet* can be more fully understood through how it is integrated into various cultural events. For example, in times past, the parties of a lawsuit would share *laphet* to symbolize the end of their dispute. In fact, the expression “taking *laphet* together” literally means that two parties have agreed to settle their differences. Packets of *laphet* used to be handed out to announce a couple's betrothal, thus served as quasi-wedding invitations. If a man is embarrassed to express himself, sending a tea packet will gently get the message across. As the Burmese saying goes, *lū mə ʔa. tō lě.; lə phë. ʔhou. ʔa.* (လူမတတ်သော်



လည်း လက်ဖက်ထုပ်တတ်), “if the man doesn’t know how to do it, the tea packet does.” Indeed, no Burmese ceremony or celebration, whether religious or secular, would be complete without plenty of laphet to go around. In a more modern usage, many students favor it when studying late into the night because it is a kind of caffeinated stimulant. (As Ma Thanegi has pointed out, this and thanaka are both appreciated and used by most of Myanmar’s many ethnic groups, making it the two unifying forces of the nation!)

J. George Scott even notes the use of laphet in changing one’s name. In *The Burman*, he writes: “Sometimes when a boy grows up he does not like the name his parents gave him. He can then change it by a very simple process. He makes up a number of packets of *le’-pet* and sends round a friend to deliver them to all his acquaintances and relations. The messenger goes to the head of the house and says: ‘I have come from Maung Shwe Pyin (Mr. Golden Stupid). He is not to be called by that name any more. When you invite him call him Maung Hkyaw Hpe (Mr. Celebrated Father). Be good enough to eat this pickled tea.’ ”

Laphet in History

“Tea is believed by some to be a gift of the gods. It is an essential item in propitiating nats or spirits. It also, along with a quid of betel, forms part and parcel of ceremonial offerings in Buddhist rituals as well as on ceremonial occasions such as weddings, novitiation or ear-boring ceremonies. In courts of Myanmar kings, parties to a dispute ate pickled tea together before the judge as a token of having reached settlement. The losing party paid what is known as *Kwun-bo*, literally “the price of betel” to the judge. A special officer collected these fees. He was called a *Kwan-bo-htein*, literally ‘officer in charge of kwan-bo, the old counterpart of court fees.’ ” U Tin U, *Myanmar Memorabilia*



A Laphet Story

The role of laphet can also be found in the following anecdote that Saya U Tint Yee shares about the great meditation teacher, Saya Thet Gyi. He describes how, after having spent extended time traveling and meditating in Upper Burma, Saya Thet Gyi declined to rejoin the householder life upon his return home, much to the consternation of his wife and sister-in-law. Instead, he expressed a desire to continue his meditation practice (the full story of this incident can be found in upcoming Chapter 10).



Both sisters had been laying plans to divide the property between themselves and Saya Thet Gyi. U Tint Yee writes: “[One day] when his sister-in-law saw him coming [into the house], she said to her sister, ‘There comes your husband. Don’t speak to him. You’ve been saying you want to divorce him.’ But when Saya Thet Gyi entered the gate, she suddenly had a change of heart and greeted him very politely. ‘Why have you come?’ she asked. ‘How are you? How is your health?’



Saya Thet Gyi’s assistant happened to be with him, and he was convinced that it was the power of Saya Thet Gyi’s loving kindness (*Mettā*) that had brought about this change in the sister-in-law. They went upstairs to the house, and the sister-in-law said to her sister, ‘Here’s your husband. Go and prepare some tea and bring some laphet.’”

Garlic Art

Some monks avoid eating laphet, along with raw garlic and durian, because they cause one’s breath to smell. They would prefer not to deliver this scent along with spoken wisdom when preaching about the Dhamma. The Buddha prohibited monks from eating garlic, in fact, for this very reason. Fresh garlic may be eaten if it is unprepared, as it is in laphet, a move likely approved by the 19th century American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens who proclaimed that “what garlic is to salad, insanity is to art,”

■ OTHER BURMESE SNACKS

- **Aloo Poori:** This is a puffy fried bread which is served with potato curry, originally brought by Indian traders.
- **Burmese crepes:** Called *Khao Soy Khem Noi* in Shan, these typically rice-flour crepes are sold by vendors in most cities and marketplaces. As the batter is being prepared, one may request such condiments as peas, lettuce, chopped peanuts, soy sauce, and other greens and herbs. Being made from rice flour, *khao soy khem noi* is a good option for those trying to avoid gluten. In Mandalay, these are known as *mont pyi thalet*.
- **Doughnuts:** While a far cry from Krispy Kremes, freshly-made Burmese donuts (*mont let kauk*, meaning “bracelet snack”) can be found at teashops or purchased directly from vendors, and are particularly tasty when dipped in tea. They are usually made from sticky rice flour, and are especially common in Shan towns. Because no wheat flour is used in cooking, they often get very puffy (and hollow) when dropped in the oil, and are best eaten before they cool down and the texture begins to change. Sometimes liquid jaggery is drizzled over them.
- **Kau. hñe~: jī dau.** (ကောက်ညင်းကျည်ထောက်): This very tasty sticky rice is cooked eaten in a green hollowed-out bamboo tube.
- **Mou~. shījō** (မုန့်ဆီကျော်): Literally meaning a “snack fried in oil,” these are fried sweet pancakes made from glutinous rice. *Mont si kyaw* may contain shredded coconut or ground nuts, among other things. Be warned, however, that eating a lot of this snack is likely to cause one’s lips to crack. There is a related Burmese proverb *mou~. shī cō bhě ni hma~: mā ti, hnā kha~: nā nē. tē. pa. mā lā: mā ti* (ဆီကျော်ဘယ်နေမှန်းမသိ၊ နှုတ်ခမ်းနာနဲ့ တည့်ပိုမလားကြုံ တွေး), which means “one doesn’t know where *mont si kyaw* is, yet is already worrying about cracked lips.” It refers to worrying about a situation before it develops, somewhat similar to “don’t count your chickens before they hatch.”
- **Mou~. le pwe** (မုန့်လေပွေ): This snack consists of thin crispy crackers, made by holding paper-thin dry rice paste sheets between two bamboo skewers and tossing it over a fire. As the rice paper expands, it gets crispy. Then, as the heat plays upon the thin paper, it appears as though the rice paper is dancing and diving between the flames on its own, causing it to be known as *mont lu swan gaung*, or “snack heroes.”

- **Mou~, le~ mā yā:** (မုန့်လင်မယား): In this snack, two halves of a rice batter ball are fried separately in different indented spaces in a special wok. Some treat or other (such as a quail egg) is added in the middle, and then the halves are married together. Before, these used to be known as “husband and wife snacks,” but in the changing times they are now referred to as “living together snacks.”
- **Moun Hpe Htou:** These delicious, rich dough snacks are stuffed with sugar and coconut shreds, packed in leaves, and steamed.
- **Mou~, bai~: dau~.** (မုန့်ပိုင်းထောင့်): are snacks made from rice paste and rolled into tiny oblongs pointed at both ends and boiled, then sprinkled with sesame and salt. The shape looks like raw cotton bits before they are spun into thread, which the Burmese name refers to.
- **Mou~, cā zi** (မုန့်ကြာစေ့): These are small balls of boiled glutinous rice in palm sugar. They are closely related to *moun sein baun* (မုန့်စိမ်းပေါင်း), or steamed rice cakes.
- **Mou~, lě. shau~** (မုန့်လက်ဆောင်း): A very refreshing drink for a hot day, *maun le saun* is made from coconut milk combined with liquid jaggery infused with small lumps of rice jelly.
- **Khau. mou~.** (ခေါက်မုန့်): These thin round pancakes made with rice flour, palm syrup, shredded coconuts, and other goodies get folded into a semi-circle just before being served.
- **Mou~, phě. thou.** (မုန့်ဖက်ထုပ်): Khin Myo Chit described these as “small pyramid shaped rice flour cakes, packed and steamed in banana leaves... a good sweet dish with their stuffing of shredded coconut and jaggery.”
- **Pě cō** (ပဲကြော်): As these are simply beans or lentils fried together, *pe kyaw* make a great snack for vegetarians, as they provide instant protein and can be taken on long bus trips. However, note that many *pe kyaw* tend to be quite oily.
- **Bū: dī: cō** (ဘူးသီးကြော်): Known as gourd-fritters, Khin Myo Chit proclaims these are snacks “which no Myanmar can do without.” They are fried in batter right before you at any stall.
- **Mā lai~ lou~:** (မလိုင်လုံး): Translated as “ball of cream,” this is the Indian sweet *gulab jamun*, and are a milk solid that gets deep-fried.
- **Kō pya~. zei:** (ကော်ပြန့်စိမ်း): Meaning “green pan-rolls,” these are uncooked spring rolls, which often contain cooked vegetables

rolled in thin rice sheets and dipped in a mixture of chili, vinegar, and soy sauce. Vegetarians should know that some *kaw pyant sein* come with crabmeat.

- ***Pā lā fā*** (ပလာတာ): This is a pancake-like Indian food that can be eaten with sugar or curry.
- ***Sa mū shā*** (စမူဆာ) These Indian imports are cheap, usually vegetarian, and widely available at teashops, bus stops, and other stands. They have a reputation for being quite greasy and are often left out all day, to the point that author Christopher Moore includes a scene in *Waiting for the Lady* in which the main character pays double simply to throw away the vendor's tray of greasy samosas. However, fresher ones may be found, and they can be helpful during long travel days if no other food is available. Note that Chinese dumplings, on the other hand, rarely come without meat.
- ***thā be~ myi*** (ထန်းပင်မြစ်): Meaning “shoot sprouting from toddy-palm nut,” these are roasted over open fires, and often enjoyed with a pot of green tea. They are usually only available in November.

A Longing for Peas

U Hpone Thant, a Burmese national living abroad, describes how much he misses *pē byou* in foreign lands: “The staple food for breakfast of our younger days and even now is *pē byou* (ပဲဖြုတ်), and how I long for them. Peas (*sataw pe*) are made to sprout after spraying with water and covering with a wet hemp blanket for two to three days. The sprouting peas are then steamed. Early mornings there will be hawkers on almost every street, with huge baskets balanced on their heads, all over the country crying out ‘Pe byote, any one wants pe byote’ at the top of their voices. These voices are also alarm clocks for many too. Call them over and what we see is a steaming bag full of steamed peas. These peas are then sprinkled with a bit of raw groundnut oil and eaten with naan bread. Here in Australia we can get *pe byote* only at Myanmar Buddhist monasteries’ fund raising events. But the peas must be of different species as the taste is not the same.”





Drinks

The following Burmese drinks are covered in other sections: green tea (Chapter 6), **sweet milk tea**, **purified water**, sugar cane juice (Chapter 6), **cold lime soda**, yoghurt drinks, and **fresh fruit juices**. Burmese attitudes towards alcohol are addressed in Chapter 7.7. The only drinks left to touch upon are soft drinks and coffee.

Until just recently, Western sodas were expensive imports and largely available only in upscale supermarkets and restaurants. There were a host of Burmese knock-offs that had similar names and colors. Referred to as “sparkling,” it can be nice to give one as a present to any kids or monks one meets. Like many other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar also has many stands that sell an array of sugar-filled syrups and shaved ice, which are made to order. It should be noted here that whatever one happens to drink, it is usually more common to do so before or after eating rather than during the meal.

Many Burmese drink coffee in the form of highly sweetened powder packets often called “3-in-1,” because it is pre-mixed with a creamer and sugar. Children commonly enjoy this with breakfast from an early age. Some teashops also prepare a Burmese version of local coffee. And although not yet common among the Burmese, new cafes in urban areas offer specialty coffee drinks, and fresh coffee beans may be purchased at higher-end markets. A Pyin Oo Lwin based plantation, Ananda, grows and roasts its own Arabica and Robusta coffee beans, and has recently built a cocoa plantation in Karen state. Shwe Ywar Ngan cultivates organic coffee.

Cold drinks are not so common. One reason may be that not all homes have refrigerators, and even those that do are subject to electricity cuts. Another reason may be the influence of **hot/cold** properties of Chinese medicine, which sees cold drinks as unsettling to health, particularly in hot climates.

It’s always a nice gesture—and certainly a meritorious one—to treat a monk to a drink after noon, although it can be important to know what is and is not permissible



according to the Vinaya. Sodas and other artificial drinks are allowed, as is any fruit juice (freshly squeezed as well as preserved), so long as all pulp has been strained out. However, one exception is coconut, for this is considered a food, and no type of vegetable juice can be taken.¹ Sugar cane juice is allowed. No product with milk or soy is permitted, whether in fresh or powdered form. The acceptability of tea made from a leaf or a bag may depend on a particular tradition's interpretation of the Vinaya, and if the monk is sick or thirsty and this is the basis of the request.

Don't Have a Cow, Dude

There is a clever Burmese proverb denoting how easily a natural want can turn into gluttonous gratification: *nwā: ṇa. ye chā< tǎ lō* (နွားငှက် ရေချသလို), meaning, “A cow is sent to a spring, only to be overcome with greedy passion.”



COOKING

“The wonderful thing about a place like Burma, where food is made in the street and kitchens are often open air, is that there are endless opportunities to watch and learn as people cook, and to taste and eat at all hours.” (Naomi Duguid, *ibid*)

တစ်လှုပ်စားဖူး သူ့ ကျေးဇူး
tə lou. sã: phū: tu. cē: zū:}

“Even for a single mouthful, one has gratitude to the host”

As in most countries, the best Burmese food is made in the home. This is also true in monastery kitchens, where many village women come to give service by cooking. Burmese village kitchens are often open-aired spaces, with few modern appliances—and even if one does have such appliances, frequent electricity outages may render them

1 This also includes any fruit juice that has strands of vegetable juice mixed in—one is advised to look at the contents before purchasing such juice for offerings. U Sarana goes on to note, however, that “flour, starch, and other food additives are permitted in fruit drinks and medicines after noon,” provided they are not taken alone. He notes that this was allowed by the Buddha himself (after having been rejected by Venerable Kankhārevata,) in Mahāvagga of Vinaya Pitaka.

useless. Markets are visited daily for groceries, and given the hot weather, many will visit several times in a day to ensure they have the freshest produce possible.

Many foreign yogis find a simpler kitchen setup than they are used to back home. For this reason, more time is spent peeling, cutting, washing, slicing, and dicing—which some have found allowed them to get more in touch with the cooking process. Foreign female meditators have shared that time spent cooking with Burmese women has been a special bonding experience.

The mortar and pestle is a common kitchen tool; the Bamar tending to use brass mortars and wooden pestles, while the Rakhine use a flat stone bowl instead. Many monasteries and small villages will forage for, chop, and stack the wood that is used for cooking fires. These are then set within an area of bricks, with a base placed on the bricks and an earthenware pot, metal pitcher, or tin pan is placed on the base for cooking. Braziers are common, and these can often be seen for sale in village markets. Fire-pits in some rural sites may be dug into clay earthen holes. In more rural areas, Win Pe¹ describes how the “housewife kindles the fire by burning wood shavings or other forms of kindling and blowing on them with a bamboo pipe.”

If one wants to learn to cook Burmese food, the best and most authentic teachers will probably be one’s Burmese friends. While a number of new Burmese (and even some Shan) cookbooks have appeared on the market lately, in practice most Burmese women



cook without written recipes. They become skilled after many years of practice and tutelage at their mothers’ and aunts’ feet. Through this apprenticeship over many years, they learn the family secrets regarding the quantities of ingredients and spices to use, as well as cooking times and techniques.

It is not only cooking techniques that can be learned in the kitchen, but Burmese culture as well. Win Pe writes, “It is here that the women

1 In an essay from *The Food of Myanmar: Authentic Recipes from the Land of the Golden Pagodas* by Claudia Saw Lwin.

of the household discuss family matters, exchange opinions and relate the news and gossip gathered at the market while buying food for the day's meals. All this is done while pounding chilli, crushing onion, deboning fish and filleting meat. The kitchen is the place where family ties are strengthened."

For those who do wish to use a Burmese cookbook, the following is a list of those presently available on the market:

- *Burma: Rivers of Flavor* by Naomi Duguid. Groundbreaking for the scope and depth of its exploration of Myanmar's cuisines and cultures, this comes highly recommended.
- *Hsa Ba* by Tin Cho Chaw. You can also see her website www.hsaba.com
- *The Food of Myanmar: Authentic Recipes from the Land of the Golden Pagodas* by Claudia Saw Lwin.
- *Cook and Entertain the Burmese Way* by Mi Mi Khaing (available only in Myanmar). This book describes a Burmese perspective on the craft of cooking and hosting.
- *An Introduction to Myanmar Cuisine* by Ma Thanegi
- *Flavors of Burma: Myanmar: Cuisine and Culture from the Land of Golden Pagodas* by Susan Chan
- *A Taste of Shan* by Page Bingham

Cooking Abroad

While many foreign yogis have to adjust their cooking and eating habits to fit Myanmar, Sao Sanda had the opposite experience when she relocated to England from the Shan states in the 1950s. She writes in *The Moon Princess*: "There was a great deal of trial and error as I had never cooked on a gas stove before, since at home there was only a wood fire. Auntie Annie [Neal] would complain at times of the smell of the rice cooking and the garlic I used. I don't think the Neals had ever tasted garlic, though onions were used for the stews. The only form of cooked rice they had ever eaten was the rice pudding so beloved by the British. At school we were served great dollops of this lumpy stodge which I suppose kept me going until teatime."

Food Superstitions

An interesting side note to the food and cooking culture of Myanmar is the prevailing superstitions that exist around eating. A trip to any market will yield large posters for sale warning that certain foods, like mangosteens with sugar or watermelon and eggs, must never go together because they can cause discomfort or even death.



There is also an elaborate set of beliefs about what pregnant women should eat, ranging from chilies causing a baby to have less hair to bananas bringing about an overweight baby to bamboo shoots and mushrooms causing fainting spells to glutinous rice making the placenta unable to separate from the womb.

What a useful eggshell!

Do not be surprised to see upside-down eggshells scattered around flowerpots and gardens while on your travels in Myanmar. Being a good and inexpensive source of calcium, eggshells are quite often used as a low-cost, natural fertilizer. Some take the “used” eggshells, wash them, and place them in pieces around the growing plant. Others recommend grinding the shells to a powder and soaking them in fermented rice for three to four weeks. And finally, one “eggspert” suggests making a type of “tea” by grinding the shells and soaking them in vinegar. This mixture is then combined with one hundred parts water and sprinkled over the plants.



VEGETARIANISM

“Many foreign yogis expect Burmese monks to be vegetarian and finding that this is not always the case can bring confusion. Without proper understanding, this can even become a source of disappointment. In Theravada tradition, the monks do not infringe on Vinaya rules by eating meat, the monks don’t need to be vegetarian, and most of them are not. In fact, it is believed that the last meal of the Buddha was pork curry and in some scriptures it is stated that he accepted meat dishes in his alms round. The Buddha instructed the monks to accept whatever food was offered as long as it did not violate the prohibitions about eating the meat of certain animals, or that the animals were killed just for them. Monks were advised to eat whatever the family cooked, so as not to become a burden as their refusal would cause the lay supporter to have wasted their time and resources.”

—Burmese meditator

“Burmese people are extremely joyful if they know that a monk is also vegetarian. They will make the maximum effort to satisfy the monk’s taste-buds, because they know that the monk is vegetarian... vegetarian monks are treated better than the non-vegetarian.”

—U Sarana, vegetarian monk from the Czech Republic

While Burmese vegetarians may be few in number, it is still a highly admired virtue among local Buddhists. In most major towns one can find a handful of vegetarian restaurants, some of which greet customers with a sign announcing, “Be Kind To Animals By Not Eating Them.” However, many Burmese, while thinking it commendable to abstain from meat and fish, simply enjoy it too much themselves to stop. Vegetarians who come to Myanmar with no local friends or knowledge of the language and culture tend to end up eating fried rice and noodles far more than they would like. However, vegetarian yogis using this guide should have few problems varying their food intake and finding a well-balanced meal at restaurants or monasteries. And, this is especially true if you can remember the Burmese word for vegetarian—*tatuloh*.

■ TO EAT MEAT, OR NOT TO EAT MEAT... IN BUDDHISM



A question that often gets asked of Buddhists is: “If it is against your religion to kill animals, then why do you eat them?” Actually, in the Vinaya, the Buddha is quoted as stating that monks can choose whether they wish to be vegetarian or not. Historically, although the Buddha himself never directly encouraged eating meat, he knew that asking the Saṅgha to abstain from meat would deprive many lay people from making merit, and so such an injunction or precept forcing monks to follow a vegetarian diet was never made.¹ There is a famous story of the Buddha’s cousin, Devadatta, who *was* vegetarian. He requested that the Buddha make the Vinaya stricter by enforcing vegetarianism, but the Buddha declined.

Therefore, those animals that are already dead—and not killed especially for any one person²—are known technically as being *pant thu koo* (ပံ့ထုကူ), meaning “the meat is found [already dead].”³ And

1 Actually, the Buddha did prohibit monks from eating ten specific beings, including humans, dogs, elephants, horses, snakes, and lions, among others. The Buddha gave reasons for each of these prohibitions; for example, humans were of the same species, elephants and horses were used by the king’s army, dogs were considered dirty, and snakes and lions can smell those that have eaten their kin and may attack in revenge.

2 In fact, if a monk hears or so much as suspects that any animal has been slaughtered especially for him, Vinaya prohibits him from eating it. The Buddha himself was able to use his extraordinary mental powers to discern the origin of any food offered to him, and similarly, developed monks may be able to do so today.

3 U Sarana notes that this comes from the Pali word “pansukuula”, which means “rag robes” or “discarded property”. In this case it means “discarded meat of a previously living being”.

while this is the letter of Buddhist law, as it were, contemporary social customs also tend to influence behavior. This was the case in the mid-nineteenth century when a senior monk issued an order for monks not to take away meat from dead horses and elephants, since the sight disturbed lay people.

Buddhism's apparent relativism about eating meat thus leads to a somewhat contradictory situation in which offering the choicest meats to a monk is seen as meritorious, although the animal in question must not have been killed especially for his meal. This paradoxical notion is expressed in the Burmese proverb *winī ta. cē. ta.* (ဝိနည်းတတ်ကြက်သတ်), which translates as, "For one who knows the Vinaya well, it is possible to kill a chicken." Its underlying meaning, however, is that anyone who knows a document or scripture well enough can find a way to justify their behaviours.

In sum, the Buddha's teachings on eating meat or not should be understood not as a strict set of rules, but rather as parameters within which a meditator should carefully examine his/her choices, abilities, desires, circumstances, and health.

Egg on Their Faces

In U Silananda's biography of Mahasi Sayadaw, he relates a story from 1952, when Mahasi Sayadaw and Nyaungyan Sayadaw were visiting Phnom Penh. He writes, "[a]t meal time, the hotel offered them only boiled eggs... Mahasi Sayadaw, though not strictly a vegetarian, considering that chicken and duck eggs implied an embryo life of flesh and blood, abstained himself from eating them. When the hotel management came to know that the two Sayadaws had refrained from taking eggs, they asked for pardon and then communicated the news by telephone to the monastery of the Cambodian Chief Monk. Soon afterwards, Cambodian monks arrived at the hotel by car and took away the members of the Burmese Mission to Onnalon Monastery, which was the residence of the Chief Monk. As it was still before noon when they could have meals in time, the Sayadaws were served with food."





■ TO EAT MEAT, OR NOT TO EAT MEAT...IN MYANMAR

Historically, at least a form of quasi-vegetarianism may have been more common in Burma than it is today. It is said that many of the residents of the old city of Dagon (present-day Yangon) were known to be vege-

tarian, largely because of their close affiliation with the Shwe-Dagon Pagoda. Vegetarian attitudes can also be seen from some of the great monks in Burma's history. For example, U Thila, believed to be an Arahant during the nineteenth century, was strictly vegetarian. This was also true for the great Italian monk, U Lawkanatha, who preached vegetarianism while walking on foot from Rome to India, and saw abstention from meat as a core part of his Buddhist practice.

These attitudes can also be seen among Burma's royal rulers. Khammai Dhammasami records that in the 18th century, King Alaunpaya ordered "that there shall be no killing of cattle for meat nor consuming any kind of intoxicant drinks or drugs, in his kingdom. Animal sacrifice at the time of harvest was strictly prohibited."

Later, King Mindon issued the same order while also encouraging people to follow the ten precepts on the four monthly *uposatha* days. As Harold Fielding notes in *Soul of a People*, "[N]one, not even foreigners, were allowed to kill beef, and this law was very stringently observed. Other flesh and fish might, as far as the law of the country went, be sold with impunity. You could not be fined for killing and eating goats, or fowls, or pigs, and these were sold occasionally."¹ Once the British came, the laws began to relax, although still not enough to suit English tastes. Local Burmese laws only allowed British hunters to take as much game as they could personally carry out. Fielding himself tells a story about happily pursuing and capturing some fowl, only to have his Burmese staff pray at his feet, beseeching him to

1 However, the king's motivations for protecting the cow may have been due as much from the Brahmin astrologers sitting in his court than any inherent Buddhist beliefs.

release the birds, and ultimately offering to pay a sum equaling the cost of the meal.

Burmese customs must have continued to further relax in the years following the British annexation, for one of Ledi Sayadaw's campaigns was the promotion of total abstinence from beef products. The venerable monk wrote a document called "The Letter of Fervent Love for Cattle," in which he extolled the benefit that the animal provided: it not only ploughed the fields that gave crops and income, but also shared its milk with young children. Ledi also formed the Association for Refrain-



ing from Eating Beef. Even before the British came, Ledi Sayadaw warned locals that the colonials would establish "killing factories" for their domesticated animals. The British proved him correct, setting up slaughter houses on the outskirts of town, with the Chinese handling pork, and Muslim butchers everything else. Many Burmese Buddhists today still refrain entirely from eating beef, largely from the efforts of Ledi Sayadaw. As for Ledi himself, he resolved to abstain from eating all "land animals" following his pilgrimage in India in 1896.

In the postwar era, President U Nu was known to be a man who brought his personal faith into politics, and he did so with his attitudes towards vegetarianism as well. He upset local Muslim communities by reinstating a ban on all beef. His successor, Ne Win, overturned the prohibition on slaughter for food purposes, and today ritual sacrifice, while not outright banned, is frowned upon in public.¹

It should also be noted that many non-Buddhist Burmese also avoid certain types of meat. For example, as might be expected, the sizeable Muslim and Hindu populations residing in Myanmar abstain from pork and beef, respectively. And ethnic Chinese may sometimes abstain from meat and fish for nine days during September and October, honoring a Taoist lunar tradition as part of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival.

1 This mainly concerns the ritual slaughter of animals to break the fasting month of Ramadan (*'Eid ol-fetr*).

FISHY TALES



Over the past 150 years, Western writers have—perhaps for the purposes of amusement and telling a good yarn—exaggerated the careful circumstances surrounding how monks may accept meat. Ma Thanegi tells how one such “fact” started out as a kind of local vaudeville-style joke, that colonial writers later began spreading in earnest. The initial joke centered around fisherman who did not engage in “fishing”, but

merely removed the fish from the water to “dry” them or even prevent them from drowning.¹ Julius Smith picked this up in 1890, claiming that if you “[q]uestion a local fisherman of the sin of taking the life of the fish, he will confidently tell you: ‘I do not kill the fish. I only drag it out of the water, and the hot sun kills it.’” Then in the 1950s, Norman Lewis wrote of Burmese fishermen: “[A]ll they do is to put them out on the bank to dry after their long soaking in the water. If in this process they should happen to die, there can be no harm in eating them.” As the years passed and these stories spread further, some Western writers went so far as to suggest that this was proper Burmese Buddhist philosophy! This can be seen in the title that author Amy Tan selected for her 2005 Myanmar-based novel *Saving Fish from Drowning*—although tellingly, Tan also informs the reader in the foreword that she wrote the entire book without ever setting foot in the country.

In Myanmar, a distinction is made within the hierarchy of animals. At the top of the scale, four-legged animals are considered more sentient than other beings, so even non-vegetarians may make more of an effort to abstain from these. At the bottom of this scale are animals with no legs, such as sea creatures. As an example, Sayagyi U Ba Khin avoided “four-legged” animals, but was willing to eat fish and fowl (although U Ba Khin only ate vegetarian when he was on a retreat, and mandated that only vegetarian fare be served at his meditation center).

1 Expanding on this misunderstanding further, Ma Thanegi agrees that “the fishermen will say the sun killed [the fish], but the British would not be aware that they were perhaps being sardonic or more likely graciously refusing to be confrontational,” the latter aspect being a common Burmese behavior to avoid offense. And, rural Burmese in the countryside are certainly known for their wit!

Some Burmese who are involved with nat worship avoid pork because it is said nats especially disapprove of it. Conversely, there are many Burmese (who do not believe in nats) that prefer pork to beef, one reason being that rice is so important and cows help farmers in the rice fields.

Some Burmese feel that avoiding meat is especially suitable for the practices of samathā and mettā. Many practicing weikza are also vegetarian. Some Burmese will abstain from meat during Waso, on their birth-day (e.g. once per week on the given day of their birth), when undertaking an adhiṭṭhāna vow, or for other special occasions.



■ FOOD MATTERS: Q&A

The following are practical questions commonly asked by foreign yogis about being vegetarian in Myanmar:

1) Is it rude to inform a monastery that I am vegetarian?

It is true that there are some countries that one can simply *not* travel to and reasonably expect to maintain a vegetarian diet. Fortunately, Myanmar is not one of them! Most Burmese monasteries are places where a basic vegetarian diet can be maintained. It is not considered rude to inform a monastery that one fully abstains from meat and fish. This should be done at the outset when one is asking for permission to stay, so that the monastery can determine if they can meet that need. While it is not appropriate to make numerous “special requests” of the kind that may be common at Western meditation centers, it is fine to make a simple request for vegetarian food at the outset. If there are even two vegetarians in an entire monastery, a special table is often arranged for them where only vegetarian dishes are served.



2) To what extent can I expect to have a balanced vegetarian diet?

The short answer is that usually one can count on at least a few purely vegetarian dishes at any meal. There are usually fresh vegetables and herbs, and good protein options such as beans, tofu, eggs, and various other soy products.

If a vegetarian guest is not expected, however, there may not be a balanced vegetarian meal on its own, so advance warning/arrangements can help to ensure that the meal is more nutritious. Bhikkhu Agga, a Dutch vegetarian monk describes his how he deals with this on his alms rounds: “If I go somewhere ‘unannounced’ on alms round, I typically receive the food that the lay people already had cooked, without having known of my arrival prior to cooking. And, they want to share that food. Most often, this is not entirely vegetarian fare, for most Burmese eat meat or fish daily. For this reason, if as a vegetarian I were to solely depend on food from ‘unannounced’ alms rounds, it might not be nutritionally complete in the long-run. But generally if I’m staying in a village for a longer time, in advance it can be announced that I am a vegetarian monk, and almost all people are very happy to accommodate for that. And if I go on alms walks more than a few days in the same place, people will inquire whether I’ll visit the next day, and so I can inform them that I eat vegetarian food. In most places the food which is offered is more than what one needs, so if something non-vegetarian ends up in the bowl, it’s easy to share it with other monks (or lay people) who are happy to eat non-vegetarian food.”

3) I want to sponsor a Saṅgha-Dāna for all the monks and nuns at a monastery. Can I request that only vegetarian food be served?

This depends largely on the culture of the meditation center, monastery, or nunnery. Some sites may already be pure vegetarian,

or vegetarian-friendly, and such a request will be understood and appreciated. In other places, however, the monks and yogis have come to expect meat and fish as part of their diet, and it may not be appropriate to demand which food can be served them, and which cannot. In these cases, practicing renunciation when giving the *dāna* may be the best policy. As one Burmese Buddhist woman explains, “at some monasteries, especially where they are studying intensively, if you only offer vegetarian food they may not feel full after finishing it, since they are used to dishes with meat and fish every day.” Even she herself is vegetarian, she says that “because it’s quite difficult for the cooks, for me this is a kind of let-it-go. Monks will not eat again for 17 hours, and it’s more important for me that they are satisfied. Serving vegetarian food to monks who are used to eating meat is a kind of benefit for the donor, not for the recipient.” Another option is to offer a *Saṅgha-Dāna* at a neutral site and invite monks and nuns to attend, although the cooking will have to be organized elsewhere. If it is announced that one is serving vegetarian fare, monastics can decide in advance whether they wish to attend.



Tofu

Vegetarians will be happy to hear that there is not one, but three kinds of tofu used in Burmese cooking: a Chinese one that is firm and white, a jelly-like brand from Kachin state, and yellowish tofu from Shan state made from chick peas. Sometimes a generous dose of turmeric will be mixed in to the latter kind, giving the tofu a yellow color.



Vegetarian Resource

If you are a vegetarian who enjoys travel, a most helpful resource is www.happycow.net. This international website gives information on vegetarian and vegan friendly restaurants around the world, with detailed information on maps and locations.

A Vow of Vegetarianism

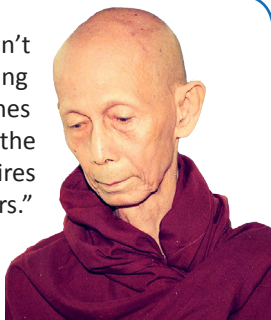
In *The Birth of Insight*, Erik Braun includes a quote from a local woman¹ who shares how much Ledi Sayadaw's discourses influenced her family's vegetarian diet:

"My mother, Daw Aye Mint, was born in 1880 at Thit Na Pha; a small village situated five miles west of Zigon (Bago Division) lying on the Yangon-Pyay railway line between Gyobingauk and Nattalin. She told me that her parents, U Pan Thin, an Inspector of land records, and Daw Khin, were very simple and pious people. In 1885, Ledi Sayadaw wrote in poetic form an advisory letter concerning the consumption of meat and went all over Myanmar to preach about it. At that time my mother was only five. She said that when Ledi came to Zigon her parents took her with them to listen to the preaching. After hearing the Sayadaw they obeyed his advice and also engaged her to do the same. The whole family definitely abstained from eating meat. Until her death in 1954, at the age of 74, she kept the promise given to her parents."

What Matters

"Being vegetarian or eating raw food doesn't mean the fires of defilements aren't touching you. It isn't the food itself that determines if there is any defilement. To be free from the burning of defilements while eating requires mindfulness and wisdom. That is what matters."

—Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw



1 The informant spoke to Guy Lubeigt in *Essays in Commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the Myanmar Historical Commission*, a book edited by Than Tun.

Waso Festival in Magway

Vegetarian yogis may want to take part in the Waso festival at Legaing Kyaung Daw Ya Pagoda, located in Pwintphyu in Magway Division. Local legend suggests that the pagoda existed even during the Buddha's day, when it was entirely built of sandalwood. The nearby Man Chaung tributary flows with rainwater from the eastern slopes of the Rakhine Yomas range and the southern Chin Hills. Each year, on the full moon day of Waso (July/August), the Sayadaw leads a procession of monks to the confluence of the Mon and Ayeyarwaddy Rivers, followed by many local pilgrims in boats. Chanting Buddhist suttas the entire way, they arrive just prior to the arrival of the annual migration of catfish to that area. It is believed that the giant fish—some up to three to four feet long—come at this time to pay their respects to the pagoda, so all the local fishermen dismantle their nets and traps for the following three months. The catfish remain in the area for all of rainy season and usually depart after the full moon day of Thadingyut in October. As the fish begin to swim away, many pilgrims place gold leaves on their heads and feed them rice husks or popcorn.

Some Famous Sayadaws and Vegetarianism

While Sayagyi U Ba Khin ate fish and fowl during his life, he did take a temporary vow to abstain entirely from meat under Sayadaw U Tejawantha at Shwe Mok Htaw Pagoda in Patheingyi in the 1930s. In addition to ensuring that his International Meditation Centre kitchen served only vegetarian food, he also prohibited the use of all pesticides and insecticides on center land. Although Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka sometimes ate meat, he proclaimed to prefer a vegetarian diet. (And the venerable monk provided this memorable line: "If one [of my doctors] asks 'How is your food,' I would say, 'Not bad. I'm a vegetarian.'") There are other highly respected monks of the past who were known to subsist on only one portion of simple vegetarian food daily. And the tradition continues today, as two of the most venerated contemporary monks are vegetarian: Yaw Sayadaw, the eldest living Tipiṭakadhara whose Dhamma talks are attended by large numbers, and Pa Auk Sayadaw, one of the most popular and revered meditation teachers.¹



1 Sayagyi U Goenka, who passed away in 2013, was also a lifelong vegetarian. In his case, however, this was not due to any Burmese or Buddhist reason, but rather his Hindu family background. In fact, U Goenka oversaw the "vegetarian line" during the 1954-56 Buddhist Synod held at Kaba Aye Pagoda.

EATING AT MONASTERIES AND MEDITATION CENTERS

“Except dying, don’t be late in eating, going, and doing things.”

—Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka,
Autobiography

ကြာကြာဝါးမယ့်သွား၊ အရိုးကြည့်ရှောင်
cā cā wā: mē. twā:, əyō: cī: sau~}

“So your teeth last longer, avoid big bones,”
(to keep your integrity, avoid unwholesome deeds)

“There is much to say about the food. Usually one individual or group sponsors each day for the main course while other individuals sponsor the additional tasty treats and fruits. Because most of the servers appear to have been coached by my grandmother on portion control, most of the time, we receive more food than we can possibly fit into our stomachs. Nevertheless, I find that the oversized portions fit well in my heart. Because we get too much food, several of us end up playing this switcheroo game with the other monks. The name of the game is to get rid of all of the extra stuff you can’t possibly eat without having someone place more food in your bowl at the same time. I usually lose at this game, and I think that is the real reason why I’m fat.”

—American monk, from an email written to family and friends



The food prepared at monasteries and meditation centers is similar to what one would experience in Burmese homes and restaurants—in other words, it’s nothing apart from what one would find anywhere else in the country. This may be in contrast to meditation centers in the West, where an effort is made to have food that is less oily, less spicy, lighter, and often entirely vegetarian. Some Burmese monasteries and meditation centers do go to extra lengths to ensure healthy food offerings, especially those that welcome outside yogis and wish to satisfy foreign tastes. For example, Chan Myay Myaing Monastery taught a number of Western recipes to their head cook so that they could offer a mix of Asian and European fare. Still, due to the generosity of Burmese lay supporters, there’s no doubt that from a food-eating perspective, the monastery provides some of the best dishes that can be found anywhere in the country.

The food served at monasteries does vary from one to another. Mako Voelkel, for example, seemed to luck out during her visit to the Golden Land. She enthusiastically describes the food that was served while staying at the Thanlyin branch of Pa Auk: “We would sit down at our table where sometimes there were over twelve courses of the most incredibly tasty food we had encountered on our entire trip! We were served dishes like peanut fried onions, seitan fake meats with potato, tofu skins with greens, shredded salad, glass noodle soup, hot brown sauce, rice, spicy cauliflower, jackfruit, tea, cake, biscuits, condensed milk with multicolored tapioca shapes and a scoop of ice cream for dessert!”

The food that you will be served at monasteries comes from three sources:

- food offered on the morning’s alms round
- food that is donated from well-wishers who come to the monastery
- food that has been prepared by the caretakers in the monastery’s kitchen.

It can be valuable practice to go to monasteries with a sense of renunciation, and that attitude extends to food as well. In the past, some tension has been known to arise because of foreigner expectations (see upcoming Chapter 7.4) regarding food. Conversely, one’s health is obviously very important, too. So that means that a yogi may need to check out of a particular monastery to get proper nutrition, as opposed to making special food demands there. It’s a balance between being respectful to the monastery, strengthening one’s own practice through

renunciation, and maintaining one's health.

Where one eats, and even how one arrives at the dining hall, differs according to the monastery. At smaller monasteries, everyone may eat in the same area, while larger ones have separate halls that are divided between lay/monastic and gender. Many monasteries arrange meals for several hundred people, and so some kind of orderly system is needed. This may include either staggered meal times or a rigid protocol concerning the order of entry. In most cases, monks are first, followed by nuns,¹ followed by lay men and lay women, then staff, residents, and workers. Food is either served buffet style and taken by each yogi, or placed on the tables where one will sit. One should be sure not to touch the food until monks have done so first, and some monasteries chant a short sutta once everyone is seated. Monks generally eat in silence and lay yogis may also do so, though lay supporters and families visiting the monastery tend to talk through the meal. One will need to request permission from the Sayadaw if one feels the need to eat in the afternoon.

One is also advised to keep one's distance from the country's ubiquitous crows at mealtimes—or the crows may eat your meal for you! Fortunately they are not allowed in most monastery or center dining halls. Meditators have also been instructed to take heed of the crow's unmindful manner of eating, as the Burmese proverb *cī: la~. sā sā: (ကျီးလန့်စာ စား)*—"the crow keeps one eye on the food while the other is distracted by its surroundings"—illustrates. In other words, a wandering mind is up to no good. While the disturbances wreaked by **crows** may never be fully avoided, it is inspiring to remember that the disturbances of mind can surely be overcome and let go.



1 The monks and nuns themselves may further line up according to seniority within their own lines. For anyone ordained in a Theravadin lineage (e.g., Burmese, Thai, Sri Lankan, etc.) there is no preference shown; however, those coming from Mahayanan lineages (Japan, Tibet, China, Korea, Taiwan, etc.) usually enter the hall immediately *after* the Theravada monks. Due to local generosity, sometimes foreigners are shown to the start of their respective lines, and it is common to allow the elderly a front place as well.

Saṅgha-Dāna

“Just as the one who provides others with food and water will never starve or go thirsty, so also the one who teaches others so that they may be wise and polite will never attain an inferior position throughout the cycle of existences.”

—Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka, *Aphorisms*



One wonderful way to make merit is by offering Saṅgha-Dāna at a monastery. This means that you provide the funds for a specific meal at the monastery, the scope of which is determined by you. You can choose whether to sponsor a meal for:

- All the monks at the monastery (one may also add nuns and/or lay people)
- One full meal or a part of a meal (e.g. fruit, dessert, afternoon tea, etc.)
- All of the meals everyone at the monastery will eat for an entire day

To offer Saṅgha-Dāna, inquire at the office or to the head caretaker, and they can inform you how much the various options will cost. Most monasteries have a blackboard announcing all the donors for the day's meals, so that the donors may remember their merit and others may rejoice in it. If one chooses to offer Saṅgha-Dāna, there are certain responsibilities at the time of one's chosen meal.¹ These may differ from

¹ That is, if one will be present at the time of the Saṅgha-Dāna. If not, the monastery will take care of the necessary arrangements.

one monastery to another. Most importantly, the donor must formally offer the meal to the Saṅgha. This might involve dishing out **rice** as the monks pass with their bowls. It may also involve lifting up the tables of food one by one a few inches off the ground to a representative of the Saṅgha. To really benefit from this powerful experience, it is suggested that donors remain aware of their good volition, and feel a sense of sympathetic joy arising from their very wholesome act.

Giving in the Scriptures



The Buddha described the state of the giving mind as having three stages: *pubba cetanā*, when the volition to give arises, which is followed by *muñcana cetanā*, the mental volition in the moment of giving, and finally *apana cetanā*, feeling joy in one's wholesome act after the giving is completed.

The scriptures describe different levels of giving, with each having a corresponding benefit. One can make merit by participating in the food-giving process in any number of ways, including offering the monetary funds, helping to prepare or gather the food items, announcing the meal, etc. There is a special benefit to physically offering the food to the monk directly. For this reason, when an entire family makes a donation, they often present the offering together.

Saṅgha-Dāna is just one of several ways that lay people may feed the monks. Other possibilities include:

- Morning alms walk
- *Soon Kat*, or inviting monks to one's home
- Helping to cook in the monastery kitchen
- Signing up for various days each month in which a family

pledges to donate cooked curries. This is called *soon gyaint*, named after the several tiered tiffin,¹ for these are sent empty to the homes and returned filled to the monasteries.

- Joining neighborhood associations that have rotating systems of donating, and may include cooperative duties.
- Donating foodstuff directly to the monastery

Concerning the last point, one may visit a monastery at any time to offer any food, whether it is just a few pieces of fruit or a year's supply of dried goods. However, one should follow the monastic protocol when doing so. Although monks are only allowed to handle food between when it is received in the morning and the midday meal, many Burmese donate dry goods such as bags of rice or cans of condensed milk to monasteries at any time of day. The restrictions are circumvented through lay helpers, called *veyyāvacca* (which Burmese pronounce as “weya wisa”), who perform a variety of tasks at the monasteries. Thus, when a layperson wishes to offer a five-kilogram bag of rice, the monk can express thanks and have the rice handed over to a lay helper, who will then store and prepare it as needed. If the monk were to physically accept the rice in his hands, however, the rice would have to be cooked and eaten before noon, or else relinquished as the clock struck twelve. In this case, the lay person can keep it and offer it the following day. However, the refusal must be a true refusal, with no expectation that the item will be offered again in the future. If a dried food donation is offered after noon, it cannot be accepted by the monk under any circumstance. Along with the *veyyāvacca*, novices may also help out, as they are considered different than full-fledged monks in that they don't follow all 227 Vinaya rules, but rather only ten precepts. For this reason, large donations can be handed over to the novices to store so long as it is done prior to noon.

Village Inventiveness

Some communities may come up with inventive ways of supplying the food needs of a monastery. For example, Michael Mendelson wrote about a small town near Paungde in which, on each day of the Rains Retreat, a different household was assigned the duty of providing enough food for several hundred monks.

¹ A stacked set of silver containers used for lunch delivery, particularly in South Asian countries.

Yogi Voices

“A few women across from us had just come from a day trip to a nearby village where they gave Saṅgha-Dāna and were on their way home. We started offering some cookies and oranges we had just bought to people around us and some of them started passing around their snacks. There was a very friendly feeling of community and trust. One woman leaned over and put a nice necklace around [my wife] Sonya’s neck, she was so full of joy from the act of giving that tears welled up in her eyes.” Dylan Fry, Canadian yogi

**Eating: A Comparison**

Around the world, local cuisines develop over time not only for taste, but also for their appropriateness for the body’s health in that particular climate and environment. So food in Burma that is traditionally grown and raised, or found and hunted, is more appropriate for the body to maintain itself in that environment and climate than food that is imported or otherwise brought from outside. The more one can generally conform to eating Burmese cuisine—both what and when one eats, and how much, and in what combination—the more comfortable one’s body will feel and the better the chance for staying healthy, all things being equal.

It has been the experience of many long-term visitors, as well as some Burmese observers, that foreigners tend to eat differently than the locals, at least early on in their stay. Some have suggested that the Burmese preference for simpler foods may result in more energy and fewer health problems. In contrast, some foreign yogis on an extended stay have reported such issues as rapid weight loss, energy depletion, general unease, a weaker immune system, stomach pain, and other nutrition-related issues. Even more discouraging, some yogis who ultimately gave up on monastic Burma reported feeling as though they could have made more progress—and stayed longer—if only their health had held up. Indeed, “as long as my health is good” is the common response heard when yogis are asked how long they plan to remain in the country.

For this reason, a general comparison of eating styles between Burmese and foreign yogis may be applicable here. ***Note that these conclusions are from the anecdotal observations of various yogis and monks who have stayed in the country for extended periods, and not the result of a scientific study.*** This information is meant to serve as a general guideline and, pardoning the pun, food for thought. The final decision of what and how much to eat must, of course, be an individual’s, based on one’s unique, individual condition. But in sum, the major difference is that foreigners tend to use a much smaller ratio of rice to curry than Burmese, and prefer taking larger amounts of curry, and a larger variety of **curries** at the same meal.¹

For those experiencing difficulties in eating, one may try eating a few meals in the Burmese manner, which would mean fewer curries and less quantity of each on the one hand, and



1 Outside of food, another critical nutrition-related matter is water intake. Foreigners should drink more water than they are used to when at home, and also to ensure they get enough electrolytes in what they drink. While this section looks at how one may “eat like a Burmese,” foreigners may not want to also strive to “drink like a Burmese” since their systems are more adapted to the tropical climate. Also, Burmese tend to drink much more of hot green tea throughout the day than water.

more rice on the other. Also, yogis who are used to consuming raw vegetables note that Burmese cuisine has very few raw vegetable dishes, so one should not expect easy access to lettuce salads or other uncooked vegetables. However, cooked vegetables are used in abundance in the curries and other dishes of Burmese cuisine.

Blame it on the oil...or not?

While some travelers find Burmese food excessively oily and the probable cause of health problems, many Burmese see the oil as a delicious part of the dish! So while some yogis come to believe that the heavy oil content of Burmese curries is one of the main culprits for foreigners' diet-related health problems, others maintain that it is not the oil that is the fault, but the "wrong" ways that foreigners take their portions and eat their food. What is a meditator to do?

Each yogi needs to determine for him/herself whether oil intake may be causing any health-related concerns, and if so, how to cut down on excessive oil in foods. For those concerned about ingesting too much oil, one thing to try is spooning the curry from the top of the bowl, as the oil collects more at the bottom in the thicker onion, garlic and ginger gravies. Or one can try ladling some curry and press the spoon against the side of the bowl, allowing the oil to drain out.

If the monastery is small and one has a close relationship with the kitchen staff, one can politely request cooking with less oil. Another possibility, as a Mexican yogi did, is to purchase more expensive, healthier olive oil for the monastery to use. Assuming one is not a monk, one can also simply cook for oneself. Finally, one can also try just avoiding the curries altogether and see if there's enough nutrition from the **salads**, stir fries, or the blanched and raw vegetables that come with spicy relish.

And if none of the above are working and one is still feeling unwell, it may be best to simply leave the monastery and stay at a hotel, where one will have access to a wider array of food choices.

One interesting anecdote illustrates how some meditators work creatively with this issue. A foreign monk had experienced many health issues until he heeded the advice of his Sayadaw. He was instructed to remove all curry and rice from the alms bowl, and place it in a separate bowl containing just boiled water. He would lift up portions of the mixture from the hot water and let the water, together with the

acquired oil, drip away, and then put the filtered food back in his alms bowl to eat. In his case, it worked, and he no longer experienced any further afflictions. The monk now regularly uses this “water filtration” scheme for removing the excess oil from curries.

A slightly different perspective on oil as the culprit theorizes that the issue is the manner in which the curries are eaten. Many foreign yogis see curries as similar to the main dishes of their culture. Therefore, they tend to emphasize the curry at the expense of the rice. By sticking to this eating style, yogis end up ingesting large, and perhaps unhealthy, amounts of oil. In contrast, Burmese eaters do not take oily curries in large amounts; rather, they typically take a large spoonful (or handful) of rice with a small amount of curry, so over the course of a meal relatively smaller amounts of oil are consumed, despite the high oil content of the food itself. In other words, newly arrived foreign yogis often emphasize the portion size of the curry, as opposed to the local population who emphasizes the portion size of the rice. Indeed, a Burmese-American comments on her native cuisine this way: “The rice is the star, the rest of the curries/side dishes are toppings for the rice.” This concept is so ingrained in the culture that when writing his *Autobiography*, Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka remembered that as a young boy, his grandfather instructed him to always take more rice than curry. In this way, Burmese curries are eaten in order to *flavor the rice*, which is the reason they are so strong, salty and oily, not rice made to accompany the curry.

One American monk used the following metaphor about Burmese curries and rice: “A restaurant I once used to visit [in the United States] frequently served special spiced olive oil with its home baked bread. The proper way to eat this was to put a small amount of oil on a small plate, then repeatedly break off a small piece of bread and swipe off a little bit of that oil. To eat a few spoons of this spiced olive oil and then wash it down with a small piece of bread would be ridiculous. Even worse would be to then complain about all the oil in your meal! In the same way, we must treat the curries in the same manner as salsa or olive oil. If you take the time to watch a local yogi eat, you will notice he will take a large ball of rice in his hand (or spoon) and then swipe a small amount of curry with it. They will almost never eat a curry by itself. It is the same as one would do with salsa and chips or pita bread and humus. When one does this, the strength is diluted to a more acceptable level and the eater can then discern the real flavor. If one eats with his hands instead of a spoon, the swiping technique

will become very clear.”¹ If Burmese feel that there is too much oil or maybe the oil is not good quality, after getting a spoonful of curry, they will tip it against the bowl, allowing some of the oil to drain off before ladling it onto their rice.

To contrast to this view of the hazards of too much oil for foreigners and the way many consume curry, many Burmese quite enjoy it! The Burmese-American woman quoted earlier notes that “it is also not uncommon for local Burmese to take the remaining oil of a dish that is almost gone, and add more rice and mix the two with their hands. Oil...is considered the tastiest part of the dish.” Ma Thanegi agrees, commenting, “It’s not just simply the oil... it’s the infused gravy in the oil.”

Traditionally, Burmese are taught to cook food until the oil separates and rises to the top—there is actually a term for this cooking technique: *si pyan*, or “oil returns.” This is done to dilute the flavor and intensity of the spices, but may also cook out some of the food’s nutrients. Many restaurants cook a few dozen curries and leave them to sit out all day, and the staff will typically add another layer of oil on top of the food as the hours pass. Some have suggested that one of the reasons so much oil is used is that the very poor are not able to afford cooking oil, so purchasing and using it in abundance can be seen as a sign of wealth.²

And even more confusingly, some visitors have suggested that far from causing health *problems*, the added oil actually brings health *benefits*. Such a view was put forward by an Indian yogi, who observed



1 Alas, it seems that the vagaries of Burmese eating culture are not so easy as to put in a box. For U Sarana notes that both the highly esteemed Yaw Sayadaw, as well as Dr. Khin Ma Ma of Shwe Oo Min monastery, agree that decreasing rice in favor of more vegetable curries is beneficial for health. However, this tends not to be the standard practice in Myanmar

2 However, Ma Thanegi notes that this is not always the case. She says that many Burmese use peanut oil “obtained from peanuts crushed in a wooden mill by bovine power—not in a metal mill operated by electricity. Myanmar food purists insist on this wood-mill process; the resulting oil is more expensive but apparently worth the cost.” She also notes that many Western food experts have found peanut oil to be especially healthy.

that “a characteristic of the Burmese diet is that it is rich in oil, one of nature’s three most effective remedies, according to Ayurveda. Oil improves dryness, slows aging, eases pain and prevents deterioration of the body. Modern science tells us that good quality (cold pressed) oils are rich in antioxidants, which prevent tissue degeneration. I believe one secret behind the health of the Burmese is their use of oil, which is seen as crucial by both Ayurveda and modern medicine.”

So in sum, there are these glowing reviews of the use of oil in Burmese cooking on the one hand, and cautions about the downside of oil on the other. *The moral here is that visitors from other dietary traditions might want to carefully monitor their oil intake, and its effect on their health, until they become used to the local dishes and how their body reacts.* As is the case with anything, too much of a good thing is not healthy, and the tendency to overdo things when dining out and eating with friends is a part of Burmese culture just as it is in most other parts of the world.

Salt of the Earth

Salt intake represents another health concern for foreign yogis vis-à-vis Burmese food. In this case, though, the concern is not that one is taking too *much*, but rather too *little* salt. Burmese curries are often heavily salted, as might be expected in a very hot climate where body salts are being sweated out almost continuously; however, when food is prepared especially for foreigners, it can be more lightly salted. For this reason, a long-term American monk recommends liberally adding table salt to meals.



Mindful Eating

“You are fortunate to be living during the Buddha’s Dispensation, for you can acquire extraordinary benefits. Forget about food and such; just exert your utmost to achieve the goal.”

—Webu Sayadaw



“Just as you take your meals at regular hours, so also you should do insight meditation regularly.”

—Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka, *Aphorisms*

လယ်ကုန်မှ၊ ပြောင်း၍ မှန်းမသိ

tou~: sə lě gou~ hma, pyau~ jou~ hma~: mə ti

“Even after three lidfulls of grain have been eaten, one does not know whether the grain is of maze or wheat.” In other words, one has just shoveled food into one’s mouth mechanically, and quite obliviously.

For monks (and yogis on retreat) who live a much more austere life, the opportunity of food affords one of the bigger temptations—and dangers—of the day. Many meditation teachers advise yogis to treat meals as another part of one’s meditation practice, rather than as a sensual break from the day’s intensive schedule. To help monks overcome these sensual traps, the Buddha preached on the subject of food and eating, most famously in the *Bhesajja Khandaka* in the *Mahāvagga*. The Buddha explained in detail how one should eat, and cautioned against taking too large a mouthful, looking all around while eating, or being too picky. On the last point, he recommended that monks should eat in a systematic way, such as from the front to the back of the bowl.

There are also some important rules from the Vinaya associated with meal times. For example, monks and lay people cannot refill their foods from a common bowl, since once a lay person touches it, it



is no longer considered offered to the monks. This issue is remedied by monks sitting at their own table so the laity does not touch their common bowls after being offered. Technically speaking, however, U Sarana notes that a monk can sit with lay people as long as he keeps the bowl on his lap, and any additional food is offered directly to him by lay supporters and not taken from the common bowl. Another Vinaya rule is that monks should not eat any rice that has clumped together in a size bigger than an egg, without breaking it into smaller pieces first.

Many monks prefer to take food in silence, so they can better concentrate on the act of eating. This is true even of great halls where several hundred monks are seated together.¹ And while sitting with lay people is not prohibited by the Vinaya, Burmese custom is to keep lay and monastic separate while eating, and for the latter to always be served and eat first. Of the 13 dhutaṅga practices, nearly half (five) deal with food, and there is a stricter monastic practice in which the monk eats the foods mixed together (known as *patta-pine*).

1 However, it is not the case of a strict code of silence that is being implemented, as one finds at many meditation centers. Monks are permitted to speak softly with one another as the circumstances require, so long as what one says is comprehensible (i.e., not said with a mouth stuffed with food) and appropriate. This is certainly not true of Burmese culture in general, where lay people often enjoy lively conversation with food as a social activity.

Bowl-Eating Practices

Pattapindikanga, or “bowl-eater’s practice,” is the monk’s discipline of eating directly from his begging bowl, without ladling it onto a plate.¹ At Maha Gandayone Monastery, novices are instructed to mix their food inside their bowls to help them decrease their attachment to the sense of taste (known as *asar hmway*). This practice, however, is not explicitly suggested by the Pali texts. Rather, the Visuddhimagga warns monks not to combine certain foods together, such as fish with sweets, but rather eat them separately. Mogok Sayadaw recommended eating from the back of the bowl gradually to the front—this is the opposite of the traditional way, which is from front to back.



More recent Sayadaws and teachers have counseled different techniques, all with a similar aim of mindfully observing the role food plays in providing sustenance to the physical body rather than as a craving to be relished and indulged. Some advise counting each and every bite or being aware of the six sense doors. Some practice eating very quickly so that the food cannot be properly enjoyed, while others eat very slowly so that the entire process can be observed carefully, and yet others will not vary the pace but rather ask the student to increase one’s awareness of the act. Some teachers even call for chewing the food, spitting it out, and re-ingesting it to understand the nature of

1 An interesting anecdote: When monks were invited from different countries to Myanmar at the Sixth Buddhist Council, the helpers who served food believed that all monks should eat from bowls. However, when Mingun Sayadaw, the chief reciter of Tipitaka, asked for plate and utensils, all the monks were then served with plates.

the nourishment in its true form. Some weizkas follow a practice of *meelut*, meaning they only eat uncooked food.

Lay supporters have been particularly inspired when observing revered Sayadaws or suspected arahants approach the act of eating. Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw was known to sit straight and bring his spoon to his mouth, never leaning over the bowl or table or dropping even a morsel of rice. He also advised that one stop eating four spoonfuls before the stomach became full, and to make sure to leave space for water. Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw's successor, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, often asks yogis to reflect at meal times whether they "are hungry" or if they "want to eat," highlighting the difference between the body's natural needs and the mind's incessant craving. Ledi Sayadaw wrote an entire book, the *Āhāra Dīpanī*, in which he discussed the dukkha involved in having to actually procure the food—which all too often may come through akusala actions—and the craving and aversion that goes with ingesting it.

The Australian meditator Marie Byles spent some time at Maha Bodhi Monastery in the 1950s, and she remembers the advice she received for mindful eating: "The Lord Buddha advised that all meditators should be mindful while they eat. They should ever bear in mind that whatever is placed upon the table is only material, and like all things around us, ceaselessly changing. External things, which we call matter, meet internal things, which we call mental, and all are forever ceaselessly coming together and dissolving. All things are in a state of ceaseless flux and flow, creation and destruction. When you bring all things in the universe within your mindfulness concerning their ceaseless change, light will come to you and you will see that they are selfless and without ego. The mind commands that the body eats; the body does the action of eating. Thus mind and matter meet. If you are mindful of these things while you eat, you will find what is Beyond mind and matter, Beyond 'nama rupa', name and form."

Similarly, Saddhamma Ransi Meditation Center reminds its yogis of the following: "We take these varieties of food not for beautiful body build nor for enjoyment of pleasure but for the longevity of the four elements as long as we live... so that existing diseases may be cured and new diseases do not arise... Please take the alms sufficiently and with appropriate mindfulness for the benefit of the alms donors who have donated for the sake of Nibbāna."



Another Kind of Food

There is an interesting story of one day when the Buddha came back empty handed from his alms round, and Mara taunted him by asking what he would eat for the day. The Buddha responded that he would “feed on rapture,” and thereupon sat down in meditation and entered deep jhānic states.

“Jaggery Meditation”

An eating example *not* to follow may be that of Ledi Pandita, one of the chief disciples of Ledi Sayadaw, who always seemed to have sweets and snacks around his quarters. This once prompted Ledi to remark that he seemed to practice “jaggery meditation.”

Be the ladle

“A cook prepares good food. He has to use a ladle. Would the wood know the cuisine? Certainly no.” Maha Gandayone Sayadaw U Janaka, *Autobiography*. In the analogy, the “good food” refers to the teachings of the Buddha, and the “ladle” is one who does not apply them.

Polite but Insightful Wisdom

“One thing I can remember is that when accompanying the Mahasi Sayadaw, we used to chat during our meals. At first, the Sayadaw, being patient with our talking, kept quiet for a few days patiently awaiting the right moment to teach us. ‘Eat with mindfulness.’ These are brief but profound words that politely came out from the Mahasi Sayadaw after a few more days later. We all fell silent knowing that this is a very good scolding for our unmindful act. This is one way the Sayadaw taught us without using any harshness in the language.” U Silanada, *Biography of Mahasi Sayadaw*

**Sayadaw Kindness**

“One day a Korean monk reported that two days ago at lunch he could not be mindful anymore because a pot of REAL Korean soup was served. ‘It was so delicious’ he said, ‘that I lost all mindfulness.’ Sayadaw just listened. After the monk left, Sayadaw asked an assistant how Korean soup could be cooked. She explained that a Korean woman living in Yangon had brought the ingredients and explained how it was prepared. To our great surprise, Sayadaw told her to prepare the soup again. While Sayadaw is strict, precise, clear, and demanding as a teacher in order to get the best from the yogis... he is very soft and caring and never misses an opportunity to improve outer conditions in even a small way.” Swiss Nun, Chan Myay Yeiktha

EATING CULTURE



မစားရ လောက်တက်
mə sā: yā<, lau. tē.

“If one procrastinates to eat, the maggots will take it.”

This literally means that in the hot climate of Myanmar, unless food is consumed fairly quickly, it’s likely it will rot and maggots will infest it. Metaphorically speaking, it is used to infer that if we don’t apply ourselves to something important when we have the time and capability, we will waste the opportunity like rotting food that sits out in the heat.

As is often the case when traveling, one finds that not only is the food quite different from back home, but the way the meals are organized and the way people eat are different also. In this chapter, it has already been noted how food combinations and portions in Burmese culture may not be what one is accustomed to, as well as different ways of eating, such as **soup** not being just a first course, or that drinks are not typically taken with meals. In this section, some differences in how food in Burma gets from bowl to mouth are described in more detail.

The communal spirit that animates Burmese life in general is found at the dining room table as well. For example, rather than dishes being prepared for the guest and eating off the privacy of one’s plate, one is usually given an empty plate to fill from the communal collection of curries and other foods. Also don’t be surprised if one sees a serving spoon go unused while diners pick up and eat with their own utensils directly from the dish or even share a single soup spoon in a large bowl. This cultural difference was observed by a group of four American yogis sitting a self-meditation course at a rural Sagaing

monastery. At the end of each meal the soup often was the only thing remaining in large quantities. While the Sayadaw had no experience of foreign cultures, he was especially observant. So, one day he asked the cooks to forgo the one large bowl and instead prepare the soup in small individual bowls. After that request, he was pleased to see the soup finished along with the rest of the meal. But that is the exception, not the rule.

Initially, some travelers to Burma may be surprised that chopsticks are rarely used, given its proximity to China, or perhaps from a stereotyped perception about how Asians eat. Burmese often use utensils or their hands. When using utensils, Burmese eat with a fork and spoon together. They hold the fork in their left hand and push the food onto the spoon, which they then bring to their mouth and alternate different curries in order to vary the texture and tastes—this in contrast to the eating style many foreign yogis employ of mixing the foods before they leave the bowl. However, the deeper one gets in the rural countryside and the more comfortable one is with one's friends, the more common it is to find people eating with their hands—which was also the way that the Buddha and his monks ate. Linda Kyaw notes that “food tastes different when it is eaten with no utensils. I think to experience life as a Burman, you should try at least once to eat as the locals do. At least in my family, there is a certain affection and almost ‘intimate’ satisfaction when eating with your hands.”

Daw Sanda Wadi, an American nun, notes that some monks believe that eating with one's hands can also be a form of medicine. She remembers a Burmese nun relating that her fingers spent much of the day counting rosary and reciting scripture, and this wholesome energy was then brought to the food via the fingers. The American nun also noted during the Rains Retreat that one of the senior monks ceremoniously shared the food from his alms bowl by thoroughly mixing it with his hand whilst chanting, and following this he distributed it to other people at the monastery. Some have even suggested it aids the digestive process, with nerves on the fingertips preparing the stomach for the intake of food. Those Westerners who have gotten into this habit have described a deeper sense of connection with one's hosts as well as the food, as utensils bring a foreign element into the eating process. Some meditators, in particular, feel that using fingers instead of utensils requires greater mindfulness. The point here is not to convince Western yogis to eat with their hands, or that it is

definitely superior to using utensils; rather, it's to inform yogis that this practice is neither unsanitary, uncouth nor denoting poverty.

The experience of eating with one's hands has also been picked up by some of Myanmar's literary giants. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian whose family emigrated from Burma, and who wrote the great Burmese historical novel *The Glass Palace*, commented that he declines to go to Indian restaurants in London or New York where one is not allowed to eat with one's hands. Then, in Ma Ma Lay's famous *Not Out of Hate*, the female protagonist marries a Burmese man who ardently endeavors to follow Western customs. For her, this means an education as to how one eats at a table with cutlery. In a significant scene from the novel illustrating the difference between East and West, the wife's sense of joy and freedom are described when she briefly visits her family. This is primarily manifested through her relief at being able to mix everything with her hand and eat with her fingers, and how much better the food tastes to her as a result.

If one is interested in trying it the local way, Myat Min Saw from *Culture Shock Myanmar* gives some advice on how to proceed: "There is a way to eat neatly with the fingers: mix enough rice for a mouthful with some meat or gravy into a rough ball. Then, draw the fingers into a bud and pop the food into your mouth. It is a natural way to eat and many Myanmar people dislike using forks and spoons, which they may be clumsy handling." Also be aware of two very important cultural reminders: 1) Never under any circumstances use your left hand; 2) It is inappropriate to lick your fingers (and a minor offense for monks). In many eating venues, a small bowl of water will be placed on the table for dipping one's fingers into to clean them.

Chewing on the Truth

ကြာကြာဝါးမှ ခါးမှန်းသိ

cā cā wā: hma, khā: hma~: ti

"The longer that you chew, the more bitter it gets."

A Burmese way for saying that "the truth will come out."

FEASTS

“As is the custom of Myanmar at meals, they were eating seriously, silently, quickly, scooping up the rice tidily with four fingers of their right hand, eyes on their plates. To converse during meals is a horrifying insult to food.”

—Ma Thanegi, *Native Tourist*

For many Dhamma students in the West, their first experience at cooking for large groups comes through providing service at meditation center kitchens. The origins of this practice can be traced to the laity cooking up similar feasts at monasteries in Myanmar and in other Buddhist countries. Since monks are not allowed to cook or store food, they are entirely dependent on the generous, daily offerings of laity; lay people, in turn, get a unique opportunity to serve monks. Thus, for foreign Dhamma practitioners in Myanmar, it is a wonderful opportunity to go back to the roots of their practice, and see how the cooking and serving routines are so profoundly integrated and holistic in the everyday life of Burmese culture and Buddhist practice.

There are a variety of ways that a Burmese layperson may offer food. For example, a housewife may cook an extra portion of curry every morning; or someone may choose to stay at a monastery for several days or weeks to cook and clean; or a person may even decide to become a permanent caretaker or monk attendant for years, even life. While some rural monasteries are small, others may have many hundreds of residents in which a dozen curries are prepared each day. Cooking duties are often shared among strangers, and one Burmese noted “this close knit community attitude of giving a helping hand is a part of the Myanmar life.”

At other times, an entire village, neighborhood, or community may decide to offer a feast to monks. Then after the monks partake, all the lay people in the area may join in. This typically happens on town festival days, religious holidays, and individual celebrations such as ordinations, funerals, weddings, birthdays, or on any occasion where one has run into a stream of good luck and wishes to share it. It is said that Burmese women—men are seldom involved—especially enjoy cooking for large groups. It is considered as showing prowess to be able to handle such large amounts of food skillfully, and produce the

same delicious flavors in a cooking pot ten times bigger than usual. And of course, the more monks one cooks for, the more merit is accrued.

Sometimes village women will wake up very early in the morning to prepare the food—as early as 2 or 3 a.m.—while at other times the food will be cooked a day before and kept in an oil and gravy base to keep from spoiling (as refrigeration is not yet common throughout rural Myanmar). The food will then be brought to and offered at the monastery (if it is not already cooked there), or perhaps served in the town religious hall, or even hosted at one's home. If one is in Myanmar for an extended period, it may be possible to attend or serve during one of these village-wide events. If one is fortunate enough to participate, one may well be astounded by the amount of food, the size of the cooking bowls, and the diversity of curries, salads, and desserts. Following these kinds of offerings, monks recite Pāli suttas, give blessings, share merit, lead lay supporters in taking the precepts, give a Dhamma talk, and may give basic meditation instructions and time for practice.

In older days, Burmese kitchens were made entirely of wood, although recently cement has become more common as Burma's forests have gradually disappeared. At many monasteries, an open-air kitchen is still the norm. In more rural settings, stoves may simply be three bricks formed in a triangle supporting an iron plate, with a fire of branches and twigs which get blown on through a bamboo pipe. Charcoal is added to the cooking fire with iron tongs, or used in braziers. Cooks and helpers wear sandals while in the kitchen.

Cooking together in large groups and ensuring there is enough for all passersby is a common feature of Burmese life, so much so that many Burmese may not understand the more common practice of cooking just for one's immediate family in the West. Sao Sanda recalls that this was a common misunderstanding during colonial times. In *The Moon Princess*, she writes: "Saophas or Shan officials were taken aback if they happened to call on British officials at meal times. They were never invited in but were often sent away, or told to come back at another time or wait until the meal was finished. In those days the British were more formal, and maintained the usual British reserve, so we always thought them unfriendly and aloof, without thinking that there might have been an explanation for such behaviour." She later explained that it wasn't until she lived in London that she came to understand the British cultural attitude around food preparation and

eating. If guests come calling around suppertime in Myanmar, it is still considered commonplace for the hosts to casually say “*sa ba ohn!*” meaning “come and join us!”

A Burmese Feast

“Mountains of cooked rice send out spurs of beef and pork, with flat lands of dried fish and outlying peaks of roasted ducks and fowls, the legs with their claws and the neck with the head and beak being extended as if they had been drawn out tight to exhibit their greatest length. Ngapi, fish paste, in all its malodorous varieties... loads the air with suggestions of a fish-curing village, or an unclean fishmonger’s in the dog days. Chinese patties of sugar and fat pork, plates full of fried silkworms, maggots from the top of the cocoa-nut tree, salt-pickled ginger and fried garlic, and a variety of other dishes beyond the ken of occidental cookery, abound all down the long tables. Alternating with these, and perhaps more pleasant to look at, are heaps of fruit, oranges, citrons, shaddocks, plantains, with here and there a late durian or two, rivalling the ngapi in its odour, and the brick-red or purple rind that conceals the luscious ‘snows’ of the delicious mangosteen... plates of betel with the fresh green leaves of the betel-vine suggest how the morrow’s afternoon will be passed in well-filled meditations by the [monks] of the neighbouring monastery.” J. George Scott, *The Burman*

A PERSONAL INVITATION

“Burmese meals are typically enormous, more a collection of assorted side dishes than anything else, and it takes a long time to work through so much food.”

—Daniel Isaac Combs, *Sorcerers and Cigarettes*

One may also be fortunate enough to be invited to a someone’s home for a meal. This too will likely be a feast, even if you are the only one in attendance. Burmese take pride in offering a wide assortment of dishes and in giving far more than is humanly possible to actually consume. This is assurance that the honored guest did not go hungry. One may be invited as a friendly gesture so one feels more comfortable in their country. Inviting someone because he/she is a yogi, however, can also be seen as a meritorious deed on their part, since they are helping someone who has come to Myanmar for the purposes of developing in dhamma.

Traditionally, guests are served first, and eat separately before the hosts, which is considered more polite by the Burmese. If this is your experience, you need not insist that the family join you, as they are most likely more comfortable treating you in this way. They may leave you be to enjoy your meal at your leisure, or else stand and watch you with smiles, and fans nearby lest you get hot or disturbed by flies.

If one is joining the family for a meal, there may be an order as to how people are served. The initial act may be to present a ceremonial offering to the home shrine and Buddha image. Then the first and largest portions will go to the senior male members. As the guest, one will likely be served first or after the more senior members; it's best to just allow the head housewife to orchestrate this. Sometimes, if the elder is not present, a spoonful of rice will be put aside first in his honor. This is known as *oo cha*. Burmese author Hpone Thant, now living in Australia, notes that “even now my wife will still put a spoonful of curry on my plate before she will take from that dish. It is a token of respect to the husband who usually is head of the household... nothing discriminatory.” Most likely the plates will first be topped with rice, followed by generous scoops from the various curries. As one passes around food at the table, it is considered respectful to do so with both hands, and one should avoid doing so over anyone's head or body. Mealtime conversations are not as common as they might be in Western contexts, but they pick up once tea and any savory snacks are served following the meal.

Of course complimenting the cooking is always nice, though be aware that giving and receiving compliments may be different in Burmese culture than one's own (see Chapter 6 for more information on this). Unlike in Western culture, it is important here not to embarrass one's hosts by lavishing praise, and in general is better to offer comments more subtly. As an example, an appropriate compliment might be inquiring about how the food was cooked, their ingredients, or about Burmese food in general. This shows interest and appreciation without going into excessive praise. At the close of the meal, one can say “*sar lo kaun deh*,” (meaning the is “the food was good.”)

Bringing a simple gift may also be appreciated, such as a small dessert, flowers, candles, or incense for the shrine. *Be mindful not to give a gift of great value at this time, as this may cause a sense of anar* (see Chapter 6) *as your hosts may feel that this gift outweighs the meal they intended to offer you!*



Repaying Generosity

"I lived and worked in Yangon for several years, and every time I visited my friend's family in Mandalay, his wife made this enormous and delicious spread of food. I was touched by their generosity, but also disappointed I had no way to reciprocate. Then one day, I learned he was coming to Yangon. This was my chance! I insisted on having them over for dinner, and prepared an absurd amount of food—entrées, appetizers, fruit, dessert, everything. Now it was finally my turn to keep offering them more food when I didn't believe they were full yet. They soon recognized what I was doing and saw how happy I was that the tables were turned, and we all enjoyed a good laugh over that." American expat, 2011

Real-Time Experience

"I was visiting [a friend's] native village... in Nyaung Lay Pin. It was my first time visiting a Burmese family, so I was quite unfamiliar with Burmese customs. We were having dinner, and the food was coming out, but no one was eating with us! I couldn't figure it out and no one had told me. Of course I know now, but it was quite odd to be served by the family and not eat with them at all. I even invited the man of the house to sit with us, but he would only do so for a few minutes after he left again. In addition to eating there, many kids in the village came over to the house to look at us. There must have been 20-30 kids watching us eat. I think we were quite the attraction." James Peterson, American volunteer.

EATING OUT

As in urban areas all over the world, Myanmar's larger cities have a greater number of eating venues to choose from. For those yogis missing comfort foods from home, here one can find sit-down restaurants featuring food from Western and East Asian countries.

At a typical Burmese restaurant, tables are crowded together, dishes displayed out in the open, and seating may extend outside. These more local eateries tend to run a few thousand kyat lower than the more formal places. In Mandalay and Yangon, there has recently been a sharp increase in the number of hip, modern-looking restaurants and cafes. While the Wi-Fi and air conditioning can usually be counted on and the prices are significantly higher, the cooking, in most cases, is not known to be very good.

Waiter! Waiter! (kiss, kiss)

The proper way to call the attention of your waiter is to purse your lips together and make a loud kissing sound, or by clicking one's tongue a few times.

The most common way to eat out in Myanmar may be at markets and food stalls. Inge Sargent, in her memoir, *Twilight in Burma*, writes: "Special fragrances attracted her to the food stalls, where traders were offering food staples and snacks of every imaginable variety. She had never seen rice grain in so many shades and beans in



so many colors. And the spice stalls offered everything from masala to mustard seeds, coriander, cinnamon, dried chilies, and palm sugar, not to mention Shan *thonau* (fermented soybean cake) and Burmese *ngapi* (fermented fish paste). The fruit stands were laden with huge mandarins, juicy pomelos, fragrant custard apples, lychees, fresh strawberries, and at least twelve varieties of bananas."

At markets, one finds a number of local foods to munch on, such as lentil pancakes, mohinga, **Shan noodles**, drinks, yogurt, ice cream... or any one of a thousand other things. One can see people enjoying them at a variety of outside settings, ranging from a small market to a series of stalls, from a wooden kiosk to a make-shift stall inside two bamboo buckets that are carted off by the owner on a bamboo rod balanced over his/her shoulder. Like at teashops, there are often small plastic chairs or wooden stools to sit on while savoring one's snack. As one Japanese meditator observed, "During the cool hours in the morning and when it gets dark in the evening, lots of food stalls appear on these streets. Snacks, noodles, chai tea, dishes of pigs' internal organs, Indian food, and sugar cane juice, you can find all these kinds of stalls here."

Note: While travelers report fewer concerns with street food in Myanmar than in countries such as India, the occasional bout of diarrhea or stomach pain is not unheard of. So, if one is new to the country and with intensive travel plans ahead, or maybe feeling a bit under the weather, it is advisable to eat where the food and conditions will be cleaner, such as at a sit-down restaurant.

For those especially interested in learning more about Burmese food culture, you can try out **Yangon Food Tours** (yangonfoodtours@gmail.com), which offers stops at five local eateries for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.



Perfection in Paratas

“I decided to walk a few yards to a tea shop, where we each ate two fluffy, soft, buttery Indian paratas wrapped around brown peas boiled to a tenderness that melted on your tongue and fragrant with deep-fried onions.”

—Ma Thanegi, *Defiled on the Ayeyarwaddy*

Burmese Barbeque

If vegetarians really want to see something to give them nightmares, go no further than Burma’s outside barbeques. Often called a “poor man’s meat dish” by the Burmese, here one can find a number of similar-looking and equally unidentifiable pieces of grayed meat. If one dares inquire further, one will learn that most are various parts of a pig, and includes the snout, tongue, liver, heart, tail, hooves, and intestines, among other body items. These are cut into small bits, and skewered on a thin bamboo stick to be dipped in a steaming center vat filled with a spiced, soy broth (similar to Mongolian Hot Pot). Or, one can go to stands that specialize in goat brain curry, goat testicles, or even fried sparrows on skewers, which are common at many bus stops for those on long road journeys.

A Memory of Markets

George Henty gives a view of what Burmese stalls may have looked like a century ago in his 1897 *On the Irrawaddy*: “The markets consisted of thatched huts and sheds, and were well supplied with the products of the country. Here were rice, maize, wheat, and various other grains; sticks of sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, and indigo; mangoes, oranges, pineapples, custard apples, and plantains were in abundance; also peacocks, jungle fowl, pigeons, partridges, geese, ducks, and snipes—but little meat was on sale, as the Burman religion forbids the killing of animals for food. Venison was the only meat allowed to be sold in the markets; but there were lizards, iguanas, and snakes, which were exposed freely for sale; and there were large quantities of turtle and tortoise eggs, which had been brought up from the delta.”



TEA SHOPS AND TEA CULTURE

“The British method of warm-the-pot-then-put-in-a-teaspoon-per-cup-and-add-boiling-hot-water-for-five-minutes is too wimpy for the Myanmar; here, tea leaves are boiled for hours on end with a pinch of salt, to bring out every last drop of tannin, and then this dark liquid explosive is mixed with cloyingly sweet condensed milk. To sip it on a cold morning, dunking chewy fried dough sticks in it, is to feast on ambrosia.”

—Ma Thanegi, *The Native Tourist*



Tea-houses Along the Path

“A very important ingredient in my Burmese day is the tea house. Like my daily meditation, I feel I can’t miss it, or should I say attached?! Once I was searching a certain place to sit but couldn’t find any. An old woman... took me to another tea shop, saying ‘let me serve you, please let me serve you’. I asked her to sit and have tea with me but she said she has to go to the doctor. After insisting on serving me tea she was gone. I sat with the tea feeling so humbled by her good will and care. I realized it was just another Burmese life lesson for me, and how much more there is for me to learn. How the care and good will of the people around help and guide me to develop these same qualities inside myself.” Einat Tzafir, Israeli meditator

Teashops are one of the central features of Burmese social life. They may not stand out when you first arrive, but after you identify their look of sprawling tables sweeping into the street and teenage—or younger—waiters yelling their orders to the steaming kitchen, you’ll be amazed how widespread they are. Burmese can idle hours away at these shops. The Burmese teashop is really a social and cultural

institution, a place to meet up with friends, exchange news, discuss recent events, or just have a break and people-watch. In fact, they are so community-oriented that it can be hard to tell where private ends and public begins, because tables, chairs and customers spill out onto the sidewalk. For foreigners, they are a great way to make local friends and learn about the area. Teashops usually get busy from around mid-afternoon through early evening. There also can be a breakfast and lunch rush, followed by calmer hours until the next work break comes.

A small cup of milk tea costs about 300 kyat, but pitchers of green tea are always complimentary. There is a common joke about poor students, artists, and couples spending many hours nursing this free green tea after a single cup of the milk tea. In fact, it's become so popular over the years that "teashop sitting" is a verb in Burmese, and one of the most popular songs of the 1990s expressed this culture with the less-than subtle title of "Hey guys, let's all go to the teashop!" (see **sidebar**) In addition to the green tea, laphet and jaggery may also be a freebie. These complimentary offerings may be thought of as a way that businessmen can continue to develop their *pāramī* of generosity. As Khin Myo Chit writes, "The shopkeeper is doing his act of *dāna*, even while he is at the mundane affair of earning a living."

Many teashop tables feature a variety of (non-complimentary) snacks that include samosas, parata, Indian flatbreads, dim sum (usually meat), small sandwiches, pork skins, and sweet breads and cakes. Fortunately, teashops serve a nutritious vegetarian plate of lightly salted rice known as *thāme~: shī sha~:* (ထမ်းဆီဆင်း; a corruption of the English *seasoned*), or the "poor man's breakfast." Particularly tasty are the inexpensive but freshly made *ei kyar kwe*, long deep fried dough sticks that are dipped in the tea before eating. Others like to dip a *kima parata* (which may have meat) or *kharli parata*, or just a bare parata. There are also plenty of various rice dishes one can order at a teashop, such as the following:

- *Kau. hñe~: bau~:* (ကောက်ညှင်းပေါင်း): plain white steamed sticky rice
- *Shī thāme~:* (ဆီထမ်း): yellow sticky rice
- *Kau. hñe~: dou* (ကောက်ညှင်းထုပ်): sticky rice in a banana leaf
- *ηə chei.* (ငရိတ်): black sticky rice

Now for the tea itself! Burmese milk tea is very sweet, made from black tea, condensed milk, creamer, and sugar. While originally inspired by the milk tea drunk by British colonialists, it has become an increasingly Burmese concoction in recent years. The tea is mixed

in large quantities; each shop has its own proportions and recipe for the mixture. Sam Hanft, an American yogi, spent an extended period of time at a Sagaing teashop, and offers the following observation:

“To brew the tea, War War would mix precise proportions of three varieties of tea leaves with a pinch of salt and a dash of red powder and put the mixture on to boil. I never found out what the red powder was. She would have three burners going at once in the tea-making area: one with tea ready to serve, one with tea currently brewing, and one with boiling water. The coals were kept hot all day long, from the moment the shop opened at 3:30 in the morning until the evening movie finished at nine at night, so there was always tea brewing and water boiling. I was never allowed to prepare the tea mixture.... The know-how required to prepare tea never ceased to amaze me. In addition to all the recipes that must be memorized to prepare the variety of drinks, there is the physical skill required to mix and pour the ingredients behind the counter without spilling and to carry overflowing mugs through the shop to eager customers. All of this must be done at top speed to keep business flowing.”

Burmese milk tea is different from the typical Chai found in India, as the Burmese variety does not contain additional spices or flavors, and it tends to be steeped for longer periods. At teashops, is not uncommon for waiters to “top” one’s cup by adding on some of the top layer formed by the milk after it’s boiled. Cups may come filled to the brim, even spilling over, and the overflow is then drunk directly out of the saucer.

The following types of tea that can be ordered are based on different proportions of Burmese milk tea’s main four ingredients:¹

- *ponehman*: regular tea, this literally means “normal”
- *ponehman zay*: “normal,” but with slightly more creamer
- *Cho gyi*: very sweet, with more condensed milk and less water and creamer



1 Note that hardly if ever is there actually a “tea menu” available; everyone just knows what they want. In that way, the above list may not be recognizable at every teashop.

- *Cho gyi zay*: very sweet, but with more creamer
- *Cho zay*: sweet, and with lots of creamer
- *Bancho*: strong & sweet, this has no water and only a little creamer, giving the tea a more prominent taste
- *Bancho Zay*: *bancho* with more creamer
- *Bancho Gyi*: very sweet & strong, this is *bancho* with condensed milk
- *Po Zay*: light & creamy, this has less condensed milk and lots of water and creamer
- *paw seint*: a mild, creamy tea
- *kya seint*: the strongest variety, and less sweet

Finally, any of the above-listed teas can be ordered as *sheh* (or half-*sheh*), meaning “special.” For a slightly higher price, a better quality of evaporated milk is used, and the *sheh* tea is served in short glasses rather than ceramic mugs. Customers have the option of getting tea to go by saying *pa say*, or requesting *kweq gyi* will give you a bigger cup to sit and enjoy while at the café.

For those on the go, there are even mobile tea vendors that push a stroller carrying thermoses through crowded streets. Selling for only 100 kyat, this tea is served in glass cups to those customers who will drink it on the spot, and in a plastic cup to those on the move. One can also purchase a larger tin-cup for 300 kyat.



Tea Everywhere, All the Time

“Each town through which we passed was usually just a muddy or dusty coalescing of a few tiny open-air shops, always including a tea shop where people indulged in that beverage until the wee hours at night, generally with a bright golden pagoda nearby set back from the road.” Bhikkhu Cintita, *Through the Looking Glass*

Let's All Go to the Teashop!

Hey friends it is over 6
 o'clock now
 Come on guys let's go to the
 teashop
 We can discuss the good news
 and bad news
 among our group of friends
 Let's talk about our life and our
 views about the world
 We can also talk about love
 and hate and our feelings
 Or the economic consequences
 that matter to us
 Do not keep these matters inside
 you



But let's all put our heads together and find the best solution
 Come on you guys let's go to the teashop and talk over things
 while we listen to the songs there
 Come on guys it is over 6 o'clock now
 Let's lie on the vast carpet of art
 Or study the science of our time

Or tell us your experience when you travelled
 Or the heartache you felt when your girl left you
 Do not let them inside your heart
 But feel free to tell us here and now
 And we can solve all the problems together
 Come on guys, let's go and listen to the songs and talk freely
 among us
 Oh let's now go to the teashop
 Let's not waste our time in useless and aimless talks
 And our minds wander aimlessly
 We can all discuss our problems amicably
 And gain some knowledge for us
 Do not let them linger in your heart
 Let's all go to the teashop guys

“Laphet Yay Sine Ko Thwa Par So Lay” by Kaiser

ETHNIC AND REGIONAL SPECIALTIES

As would be expected in a country like Myanmar, made up of so many distinct regions, cultures and ethnicities, there is an equally varied cuisine. Indeed, as one travels around Burma, the food changes like the culture and scenery. In this section, the culinary traditions of Myanmar's major ethnic groups are briefly described.

Shan Cuisine

A Shan Passion for Food

"Vendors constantly plied the aisles with snacks of all descriptions—sticky rice roasted in bamboo, tongue-numbing chili and sour-tea salads, rice crackers as big as your head. I was happy to note that the Shan shared the same passion for snacks as their ethnic cousins the Thais, who consider it madness to embark on even a short trip without enough sustenance for a journey of intergalactic distance."

—Andrew Marshall,
describing his travels in Shan State in *The Trouser People*.



Just as Shan and Bamar cultures are different in their traditions—such as dress, customs and language—their cuisines are also quite distinct. Even Shan cuisine itself varies according to its location, with northern Shan cuisine resembling Chinese fare, and Eastern and Southern Shan styles having many similarities with Thai food. "But the taste will be different as in its own way," states one resident of Taunggyi. Some foreign yogis and food writers opine that, overall, Shan cooking seems more creative (and a few will even add more tasty) than Bamar cuisine.

Speaking generally, Shan cuisine uses more vegetables and the cooking process employs less oil and takes less time than in Bamar kitchens, causing the dishes to be lighter. Shan cooking relies strongly on the flavors of added herbs and fermented soy products, and by not

using much oil or water, many dishes end up with a more piquant taste than one typically finds in Bamar cuisine. This is good news for vegetarians since the fresh herbs and soy products are used in place of Bamar cuisine's omnipresent fish paste (*ngapi*).¹ Shans prefer glutinous rice, as do nearby Thailand and Laos, and enjoy pickled condiments during meals.

The most common base in Shan food is dried, fermented, **soybean cakes** (*hto nao* or *tha~: nō*, ထန်နို့), which can also be used as a topping for food when combined with peppers, dried onions and garlic. Other familiar toppings in Shan cooking include lime, toasted sesame seeds, and sliced shallots. Due to its proximity to China, there are some Chinese influences on the cuisine, including use of the five-spice powder in place of the commonly-used chili oil in other parts of Myanmar—although for many Shans, they use their own local spice concoction) For the adventurous non-vegetarian traveler, there is an interesting collection of Shan insect dishes like sour ant eggs, crickets, dragonflies, grasshoppers, wasp larvae, and beetle embryo.

Shan Noodles are the most famous type of Shan food and comprise the standard Shan breakfast, in contrast to Myanmar's Bamar regions. While Shan Noodles can be found throughout the country, the taste is more vibrant and the ingredients fresher when cooked in Shan state. If they are not already prepared as vegetarian, it is very easy to specify one's wish when placing the order. Shan Noodles come in a "salad" or "soup" form, another way of saying dry or wet dishes, respectively. As listed below, these noodles are not one specific dish, but are many types and varieties (the first four are rice noodles):

- *Ye zei~* (ရေစိမ်), which literally means "immersed in water" because they are sold in dehydrated form in the market and must be immersed in water to soften before cooking.
- *Sha~ zī:* (ဆန်စေး), meaning "sticky," the most commonly served Shan noodle outside of the Shan states.
- *Sha~ pyā:* (ဆန်ပြေး), flat noodles.
- *Mī: ṣē* (မြီးရှည်), round noodles.

1 *Ngapi* is seen as so quintessentially Burmese that it is said that even Indians who have lived in the country for generations can't develop a genuine liking for it. While Shans don't use the fish sauce as ubiquitously, they tend to enjoy more pork and beef than their Bamar contemporaries. But these are not made to be used as bouillons for soup, meaning that many still stay vegetarian.



As noted above, because its pleasant climate and good soil produce such a fertile harvest, Shan cooking offers more vegetarian dishes than in Bamar cuisine, both raw and cooked. Many Shan families have their own vegetable patches outside their homes, and cook frequently with pumpkin, chayote, beetroot, white radish, and other veggies that aren't used as often as in Bamar cooking. To add flavor to the dish, local herbs and foraged plants often supplement a family's personal harvest. Most Shan meat dishes have vegetables mixed in, meaning that its meat dishes feature the taste of these veggies, as well as various kinds of sour leaves.

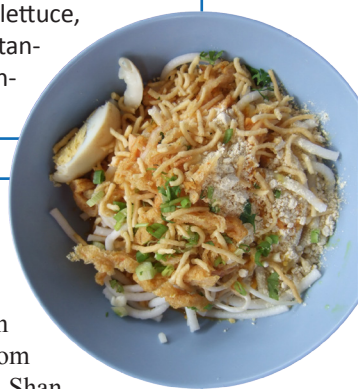
In addition to having greater access to a wide range of freshly grown vegetables, Shan State also produces most of Myanmar's green tea, which is then either dried or pickled, to be drunk or eaten. Other areas in the Shan hills are solely dedicated to wheat or barley. If you find yourself in any Shan village or town, be sure to visit the colorful five-day markets, where you will see a variety of local villagers shopping their own potpourri of home-grown produce.

Shan Produce

The following are just some of the treats to be found grown fresh in the rich soil of Shan state: rice, wheat, soya beans, sugar cane, niger seed, sunflowers, maize and peanuts, potatoes, cabbage, cucumber, cauliflower, celery, eggplant, hops, kale, kholrabi, lettuce, mustard, rape, roselle, tomatoes, chayote, oranges, tangerines, quinces, damson plums, peaches, pomegranates, persimmons, pears and strawberries.

More on Mee Shae

In the Dry Zone, these round noodles are known as *mou~. tī* (မုန့်တီ) or *na~. jī* (နန်းကြီး). There are three more round noodles classified by the respective size: *na~. la* (နန်းလတ်), *na~. tē* (နန်းသေး). In Shan state, *mī. šē* is the most common, a name derived from the Chinese *mi xian*, or literally *rice-rope*. In the Shan salad version of *mī. šē* (known here as *mī. šē thoat*), tomato paste is used as seasoning.



More good news for vegetarians is that the Shan are also fond of using various forms of tofu in their cooking, either as an additive with noodles or rice, or as its own dish. Shan specialties include the following:

- **Shan Rice:** Nutritious vegetarian options are made with glutinous yellow rice with roasted garlic and onions and other vegetables mixed in, including boiled potatoes. The rice is kneaded with tomato pulp and chili oil. Vegetarians may wish to request that the fish flakes be held!
- **Khawpok:** This is a Shan glutinous rice pancake that is available in purple or white colors.
- **Shan Soup** or *tohu nway*: Especially common in morning markets, this vegetarian soup is yellow in color and quite thick, and usually has a helping of Shan tofu and vermicelli noodles, along with an assortment of local fresh herbs.
- **Swan Tang:** Inspired by the Chinese 酸汤 (which is where the Burmese name comes from) and often referred to in English as “sour soup.” This is prepared from mustard greens. Originally from Yunnan Province, the taste of this soup is quite piquant and not to be missed. Although a number of ingredients are included in the dish, they are not meant to be eaten, but rather just flavor the broth.
- **Tofu Salad:** Often topped with fresh shallots, lime, soy sauce, and other herbs, this cool dish is a great appetizer and easy on the stomach.
- Finally, there is the ubiquitous **fermented mustard pickle** (*hpa zong* in Shan and *mou~. ñě~: che~* in Burmese), which is served with every meal, and enjoyed in a similar way to the Korean kimchee.

Shan Food Memories

“The only food of Hsenwi I remember clearly was the warm to-fu, a kind of a very thick pea-soup, which the Tai Neua or Shan Tayok vender used to bring in the early misty mornings. It was mouth-wateringly delicious, eaten with fried crushed garlic, a touch of soya sauce and chilly oil, sprinkled with coriander and spring onions.” Sao Sanda, Moon Princess

“Breakfast, when I found it, was unusual. I chose a bowl of Shan sticky noodles with scraps of meat and a sweet, glutinous sauce. This was topped with crushed peanuts, chopped coriander and a dollop of syrup like jaggery. I’d never tasted anything like it. It was a sort of collision between a main course and dessert- like eating spaghetti alla carbonara and custard at the same time.” Andrew Marshall, The Trouser People

Bon Appetit in Shan State*Kin waan waan kha!***Shan Fermented Soybean Products, hto nao**

While fish-paste sauce (*ngapi*) can be found in most Bamar cooking, Shan food often uses a vegetarian-friendly substitute of fermented soy—in fact, this is sometimes called Shan *ngapi* (the Burmese also have a version called *beh ngapi*). To make *hto nao*, soy beans are fermented and after cooking ground into a paste. *Hto nao* can take many forms, from paste to pellets to flattened disks. Japanese travelers in Shan state have compared it to their native miso,¹ although the *hto nao* is not nearly as piquant or concentrated—however, like miso, *hto nao* can also be used as a thickener to any soups, contrasting it with the clear Bamar soups one finds in the Dry Zone.

Hto nao paste cannot keep without refrigeration, so it needs to be dried for storage in a culture where refrigeration is not yet a norm of daily life. Naomi Duguid, in her *Rivers of Flavor*, found a recipe for how the paste can be made via air-drying, and notes that such flavors as ginger, lemongrass, sesame seeds, wild lime leaves, and dried chili may be added to it. Whichever way it is prepared and served, one of the wonderful things about the *hto nao* is that it adds protein and substance to any vegetable dish, making vegetarian dishes seem more full-bodied. And the *hto nao* adds a delicious taste as well!

As if soybean paste, dried soy, and fresh tofu weren't already enough protein to excite vegetarian yogis, Shans also grow an amazing variety of beans and lentils throughout the region. Any of these can be fermented and made into a paste that can be added to any vegetable dish.

Writing of a time almost a century ago in *Moon Princess*, Sao Sanda notes the Shan affinity with this food even then. She writes, “[Hto Nao] is a favourite Shan food [and is]... black or dark brown in colour, having been fermented, made into flat cakes, and dried in the sun. There are a number of different ways of using it to make tasty dishes. In this instance, the flat cake was toasted and pounded into a powder then sprinkled over the hot rice. Even now it is always a treat to receive a packet of *hto nau* from the Shan States.”

1 While Indonesians say it's similar to tempeh.

Shan Tofu

Shans make their tasty and nutritious tofu out of chickpea flour, and once made, further manipulate the texture to fit a variety of different dishes, from salads to curries to stir-fries to soups. Additionally, in place of the pork crisps you find in many Bamar restaurants and teashops, the Shan often serve yellow strips of dried tofu. These dried tofu strips make a great complement to any meal, as a chip-like condiment that can be dipped in sauces and soups, or a tasty local snack that can be bought for the road.

Mon Cuisine

Mon and Bamar cultures have many similarities, and the same tends to hold true for their cuisines. One slight difference is that Mon dishes tend to be spicier and, in restaurants and homes, one might find more variety in the number of dishes offered.

Chin Cuisine

Northern Chin State is one of the few places in the country where rice is actually not the staple; instead, it is corn. In some Chin dialects corn translates as “foreign millet.” One tasty sour soup using corn is known as owng lowt. Authentic Chin food also benefits from the many greens and wild mushrooms to be found among the Chin hills, and chilies and salt are common in place of the typical Burmese fish sauce. Most Chin meals are served with ground sesame and salt and oil. Chins rarely fry their foods but prefer boiling. The beef in Chin state comes from a bovine species called Nwa Nauk, which is said to be very tough to cook and hard to chew, so beef jerky is commonly eaten in Chin state.

Kachin Cuisine

Kachin cuisine may be the most unique and distinct of any cuisine found in Myanmar, just as Kachin geography is quite different from the rest of the country. As the land in Kachin state is more mountainous, freshly killed game, such as deer, wild boar and other animals is widely eaten. Unlike Bamar food, it is rarely fried and little fat is

used in cooking. Instead, the meat is baked or boiled over an outside fire. For this reason, Kachin cuisine is lighter and often includes fresh herbs instead of spices. Most dishes are served with a side of *jahptu*, a delicious chili made from roasted tomatoes, shallots and other herbs. A tasty dish that has vegetarian possibilities is called *shatjam*, while *sipa* is an authentic Kachin vegetarian dish.

Rakhine Cuisine

Rakhine food is in some ways similar to Bengali cooking, which might be expected given its geographic location and its cultural ties to Bangladesh and India's Bengal region. Bean dishes are common, curries are a bit spicier, and meals are often accompanied by bread.

Regional Specialties

The following are regional specialties, and foreign meditators may want to try such delicacies if they plan a trip around the country:

Site	Specialty
Mandalay	Mee Shay Noodles <i>Mondi</i> (thick rice noodles mixed with bean powder)
Chin State	Apples Ox Curry
Pyin Oo Lwin	Tofu Salad
Mawlamyine	Durian and mango preserves Coconut Milk Curries
Mon State	Mangosteen
Karen State	Elephant Foot Salad
Sagaing	Jaggery and palm sugar
Naypyidaw	Fermented bamboo shoots
Bate	<i>Paounjei</i> , a vinegar made by fermenting nipa palm sap with water, and used in curries to provide a sour taste
Zalun	Ginger Salad
Kyan Khin	Rice Salad
Nyaung Tone	Roasted Lima Beans
Dawei	Pineapple Rice
Rakhine State	Gone myow mah kyaw, a tubular worm that lives inside bamboo stalks.



Indian and Chinese Cuisine

While restaurants serving authentic Indian or Chinese cuisines are not so common in Myanmar, aspects of their cooking culture have made their way into standard Burmese cooking. This is not surprising given the historical and cultural impacts of Myanmar's Indian and Chinese immigrants.

Among Chinese influences, soy sauce is common in most kitchens, as is steaming and stir-frying. Burmese will also frequent “Chinese restaurants” on social occasions, although these restaurants seem to have a fairly ambiguous relationship with authentic Chinese cuisine. More genuine are the hot pot restaurants that can be found in larger towns, or those with large Chinese populations such as Lashio or parts of Mandalay. Hot pots—where a boiling **soup** is placed at your table along with the ingredients you order to dip/cook in it—is a great vegetarian option.

There are a number of Indian spices that Burmese use in their own **curry** dishes. Indian biryani restaurants (see Chapter 9.1) serve relatively cheap and filling meals, and biryanis are commonly served at gatherings because they are essentially a one-dish meal. Indian influences may also be seen in the common use of chickpeas in Burmese cooking. Here, these can be fried in batter and eaten as a snack, or roasting and grinding them to a powder and used as a condiment. One

important difference is that Indian food uses a more complicated and generous array of spices than Burmese cooking.

The Hot and Cold Food System

Burmese will sometimes talk about a certain food being “hot” or “cold.” While they may be warning you not to burn your tongue on the soup, more likely they are referring to a commonly held traditional belief about the warming or cooling effect that food has on the body. This is based in the concept that good body health is a result of maintaining balance. “Warming” foods, including some that could be physically cold, are thought to increase heat in the body, which is a good thing if one’s body is “cold.” However, warming food can lead to overheating in a person whose body already runs “hot.” The reverse is true for “cooling” foods. Similar beliefs about food are also found in the traditional medical systems of Iran, India, and China.

In the Chinese system, examples of cold foods are green tea, kelp, tofu, tamarind and cucumbers, and some hot foods are garlic, ginger, most meats, and walnuts. Hot and cold body states refer to a person’s overall condition, rather than specific symptoms, as any particular complaint could likely be caused by hot or cold in this system depending on the situation. Still, some generalization is possible. For instance, flushing and fatigue after a hot day are likely due to heat, so eating a salad or fresh watermelon, both considered cold foods, could be beneficial. Likewise, in this system, muscle aches that feel better in the presence of warmth are probably caused by cold, so a steaming cup of ginger tea, considered a “hot” food—though not because it used hot water—would be helpful.







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